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ATTEMPTS BY RUSSIA TO **DESTABILISE** THE UKRAINIAN STATE USING POLITICAL MEANS AND **INTERFERENCE** IN ITS RELATIONS AMONG ITS NATIONALITIES **(1991–2014)**

Abstract

As a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine declared its independence. In the years 1991–2013, Russia continuously interfered in Ukraine's internal affairs, supporting separatist movements of the Russian minority and of Russian-speaking Ukrainian citizens. In 2014, Russia engaged in an act of aggression against Ukraine. It made use of pro-Russian separatists, Ukrainian citizens, in the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the creation of the pseudo-independent Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (Donbas). After a further attack on Ukraine in 2022, Russia conducted the annexation of Ukraine's south-eastern oblasts. Russia questions the ethnic, cultural, and religious separateness of the Ukrainian nation. It holds that Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians should form a single, common union state. It denies Ukraine the right to independent choice of international integration structures, primarily accession to the European Union and NATO.

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Introduction

The Russian Federation considers the entire area of the former Soviet Union to be its exclusive zone of influence (Bryc 2022; Szoszyn 2022; *Putin…* 2022). The Russian Federation assumed the dependent states of Central and Eastern Europe would be part of the Russian integration structure. To keep them within the Russian zone of influence, it used political, economic, and military pressure. The decisions of these states in favor of integration with Western integration structures, in particular NATO and the European Union, have been perceived by Russia as a hostile policy. For this reason, it has incited separatism among the Russian, Russian-speaking, and Orthodox populations of Georgia (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Adjara), Moldova (Transnistria, Gagauzia), and Ukraine (Transcarpathia, Crimea, Donbas) (here one could also include support for non-Russian Armenian separatism in Azerbaijan, namely Nagorno-Karabakh); Russia destabilises these states if their leadership is not aligned politically with Russian interests. Russia supports separatist provinces in neighboring states, invoking in its international propaganda a series of arguments, such as these provinces' right to self-determination, the protection of the rights of the Russian population, the maintenance of peace, human rights, the war on terror, and so on. Russia has recognised such regions, completely dependent on Russia in economic and military terms, as independent states (2008, Abkhazia, South Ossetia in Georgia) integrating them into Russian international structures or annexing them, as in the case of Crimea (2014), Donbas (2022), and parts of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts (in Ukraine) (2022). The aim of this article is to show, based on the example of Ukraine, how Russia has attempted to dominate the post-Soviet sphere after the collapse of the Soviet Union, by exploiting
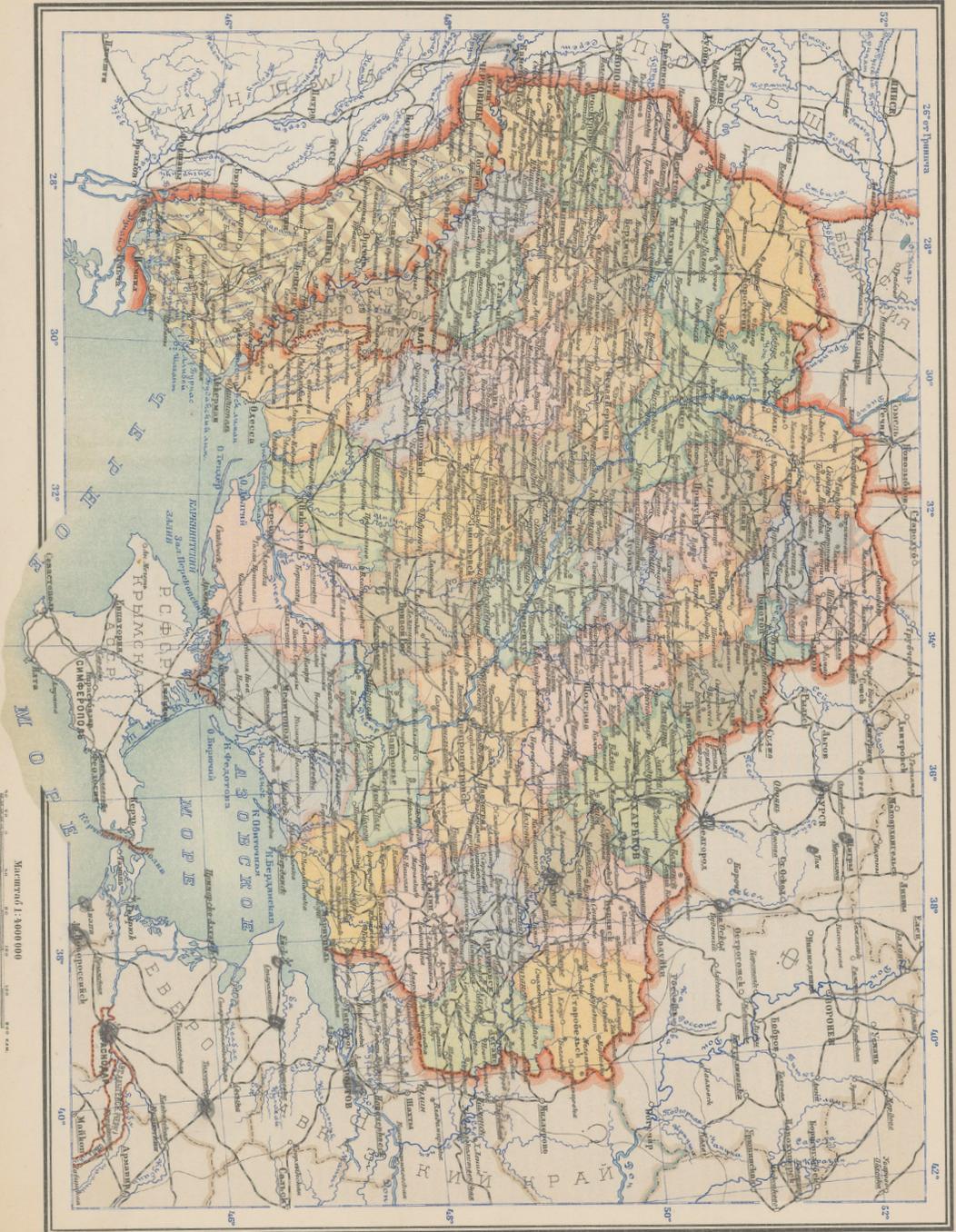
Pre-war Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (1928). Donetsk is named "Stalin" there.
Atlas Soyuza Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik. Moscow: Izdanie TsIK SSSR, 1928.
National Library, Warsaw, Poland

Map of the South-Western parts of the former Russian empire prior to 1914, entitled "Yuzhnaya Rossiya" (Southern Russia), displaying the former Russian governorates of Kiev (Kyiv), Poltava, Kharkov (Kharkiv), Ekaterynoslav (Dnipro), Kherson, Simferopol, Kamenets-Podol'sk, and Kishinev. Geograficheskiy Atlas Tovaristva "Prosveshchenie". Sankt Petersburg. National Library, Warsaw, Poland

ЮЖНАЯ РОССІЯ.

Масштабъ 1:3700000

Географическій Атласъ.

Т-во "Просвѣщеніе" въ Спб.

political, economic, ethnic, cultural, and historical differences. In the view of the author, the Russian state makes use of methods used by Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union; it has adapted them to current international relations in order to ensure the effectiveness of its imperialist policies along traditional lines of Russian expansionism (Pertsev 2025). The use of a chronological-historical method allows the difficulties facing Ukraine in terms of territorial cohesion and national minorities to be shown (Horska 2009), difficulties which Russia attempts to exploit to subjugate the Ukrainian state to itself and/or to partition it.

The Collapse of the USSR, the Creation of Integration Structures in its Former Territories, Ukraine and Euro-Atlantic Integration Structures

Between the years 1989–1991, the Eastern Bloc and the USSR collapsed. The former Soviet republics declared their independence in spite of attempts by the Soviet army and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to halt this process during 1988–1991. To this end, the Soviet Union and Russia made use of conflicts between nationalities and the Russian minorities to incite separatist movements in individual Soviet republics, informed mainly by geopolitical considerations rather than ethnic ones (Szul 2024; Miszewski 2020, pp. 263–307; Rutland 2015, p. 122–128). During the independence of these states, Russia has continued its policy of their internal destabilisation (Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk 2021, pp. 487–514; Żakowska 2021, pp. 515–535; Gardocki 2015, pp. 37–55; Olszewski 2021; Kosienkowski 2010; Solak 2009). After the unsuccessful August Coup attempt, incited by Gorbachev's deputy, the vice-president of the USSR Gennady Yanayev (Anisimow 2017, pp. 410–413; Jach 2005, pp. 359–378), the leaders of Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia signed the Belovezha Accords on 8 December 1991, creating the Commonwealth of Independent States in place of the USSR (Michur-Ziemba 2007, pp. 223–246). Bringing together the majority of the former Soviet republics, although without the Baltic states, this organisation did not create deep relations between the post-Soviet states. Russia in turn did not wish to allow the states of the CIS to join political, economic or military organisations which it itself was not a member of, or which it considered to be hostile, such as the European Union or the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Inoziemcew 2025; Panek 2023; cf. Panek

2015; Panek 2021). Apart from the CIS, established mainly for show, Russia also created political, economic, and military organisations with stricter formulas of cooperation that the former Soviet republics were meant to join. These included the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), established on the basis of the Tashkent Treaty in 1992; from 2002 the CSTO included Armenia, Azerbaijan (1993), Belarus (1993), Georgia (1993), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia, and Uzbekistan; in 1999 Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Uzbekistan left the CSTO, although the latter rejoined for the period of 2006–2012; the Union State of Belarus and Russia, established in 1996; the Eurasian Economic Community, in 1996–2014 this included Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (1998), as well as Russia and Uzbekistan (2006–2008); the Eurasian Customs Union, in 2010 this included Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia; the Eurasian Economic Union, in 2015 this included Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia (*Quo vadis… 2020*; Grabowiecki and Fiedorczuk 2021). Refusal to accede to these organisations was treated by Russia as a hostile policy towards itself and a threat to its security (Jarosiewicz and Fischer 2015, pp. 1–7; Szewczyk 2017, pp. 83–94; Kiss, Bktasheva and Szabó 2021, pp. 35–64). When political, economic, and propaganda operations did not bring about a change in the positions of other post-Soviet states, Russia has resorted to interference in their internal affairs, including with the use of force, such as in the case of Moldova – the Transnistria War 1990–1992 (King 2000; Całus 2016), Georgia – the South Ossetia Wars 1991–1992 and 2008; the war in Abkhazia 1992–1993 (Górecki 2022 A; Saparov 2014; Lynch 1998; Chervonnaia 1994), Azerbaijan – the Armenian--Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh conflict 1992–1994, 2016, 2020, 2022, and 2023 (Szeptycki 2021; Górecki 2020b), Ukraine – 2014–2015 the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, since 2022 the Second Russo-Ukrainian War and the annexation of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson oblasts (Plokhy 2023A; Ramani 2023; D'Anieri 2023) and in the states of Central Asia – Tajikistan 1992–1997 and Kazakhstan 2022. [The Chechen Wars, due to the fact that the Russian Federation has not renounced their national sovereignty over Chechnya, would be beyond the scope of this article, as it concerns Russian support for separatism beyond the borders of Russia – editor's note].

In 1990, the Verkhovna Rada of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic enacted a resolution on the declaration of the sovereignty of Ukraine, which for the Ukrainian communists was to be a road

towards a new socialist union of Soviet republics with a limited role for the center (Moscow), while the Ukrainian nationalists expected it to be a road to an independent Ukraine. In March 1991, the communist authorities of Ukraine took part in a USSR-wide referendum aiming to preserve the Union, conducted at the behest of the president of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev (Magocsi 2017, p. 915). Among the 83.52% taking part in voting, 70.16% opted for preserving the USSR, while 27.99% were against this. On the same day, proponents of Ukrainian independence organised the so-called Galician Referendum (in the Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Ternopil *oblasts*), in which voters received two ballots, one white (the USSR referendum) and one grey (Ukrainian independence), the results for the abovementioned three *oblasts* were 89.6%, 90%, and 85.3%, respectively for Ukrainian independence. In turn, the inhabitants of Crimea (except Sevastopol) responded with 79.3% in favor of preserving the USSR, with a turnout of 87.6% (Rest 2021). A closer look at the results of the referendum shows that the western oblasts, which before the World War II were a part of the Second Polish Republic, were in favor of the independence of Ukraine. The eastern and southern oblasts of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, where there was a significant Russian minority and where the majority of inhabitants spoke Russian as their first language, were in favor of preserving the USSR and Ukraine as one of its constituent republics (Petro 2015, pp. 18–31; Kiryukhin 2015, p. 57–64). The collapse of the USSR could not, however, be prevented either by the referendum or the special powers granted to the president of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, in December 1990. Three days after the unsuccessful coup attempt by the vice-president of the USSR Gennady Yanayev in Moscow, the Verkhovna Rada announced in August 1991 the Act of Declaration of Independence of Ukraine. The Communist Party of Ukraine was delegalised. In the independence referendum held on 1 December, 84.18% of the citizens of Ukraine took part, of whom 90.32% voted in favor of independence. Poland was the first state to recognise Ukraine, followed on 2 December 1991 by Canada and Russia. In December 1994, the United States, Great Britain, Russia, and Ukraine signed a memorandum in Budapest guaranteeing the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine in return for Ukraine handing over its post-Soviet nuclear arsenal to Russia and agreeing to join the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (Synowitz 2014).

Russia, however, was not reconciled with the independence of Ukraine nor of Belarus, treating the Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians as

a single nation (Radzik 2016). Russia managed to implement integration with Belarus in the form of the Union State of Belarus and Russia (1996). A similar process was intended for Ukraine (Molhanov 2015, pp. 195–204; Radzik 2016, pp. 64–67; Kwiatkowska 2024). In the post-Soviet zone, Russia has used political and economic instruments to protect its interests. Political means have included supporting pro-communist and pro-Russian elites in elections, exploiting the Russian minority, aggravating antagonisms between nationalities in order to destabilise independent states, imposing itself as a peacekeeper in internal conflicts which it itself has inspired, recognizing the independence of rebellious provinces, granting inhabitants of such provinces Russian citizenship and including them within the Russian currency and economic system. Economic means have included granting privileged access to the Russian domestic market, sale of energy resources at preferential prices, tariff wars. Alongside military means such as supporting separatisms via the Russian military and special forces, such as in Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea, Donbas, and by maintaining military bases in Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, and Ukraine. Russian armed forces have also been present as "peacekeeping forces" in conflict regions, and the Soviet Union and then Russia has been involved in and conducted armed interventions in Moldova 1990–1992, Tajikistan 1992–1997, Georgia 2008, Ukraine 2014–2015, 2022, Azerbaijan 2020–2024, and Kazakhstan 2022 (Akopjan 2012, pp. 481–485; Włodowska-Bagan 2011, pp. 38–46; Rogozińska and Olech 2020; Zala 2025).

Since accepting membership in the CIS, Ukraine has not joined the structures created by Russia in the former USSR (Kowalski 2022, pp. 435–450). It began in 1997 to cooperate in creating an alternative structure to the CIS in the form of the GUAM organisation, a regional body associating Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova. This initiative was started in 1994 by Georgia. During a summit of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg (1997), a consultative forum was established. In the years 1999–2005, Uzbekistan was also a member of the organisation (GUUAM). In May 2006, the presidents of the four GUAM states signed a declaration on the creation of the GUAM Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development, headquartered in Kyiv. Its main aims are: 1. the democratisation of member states, protection of human rights, and economic development, 2. cooperation in the resolution of regional conflicts and ensuring stabilisation and security, 3. creation of a free trade zone for member states and ensuring energy security, 4. actions aimed

Viktor Yushchenko, former president of Ukraine (2005–2010) (left), Petro Poroshenko, former president of Ukraine (2014–2019) (centre), Leonid Kuchma, former president of Ukraine (1994–2005) (right), during the funeral ceremony for Leonid Kravchuk. Kyiv, Ukraine (17 May 2022). Photo: Dmytro Larin / Shutterstock ID 2157724451

at European integration by strengthening ties with the European Union, NATO, and other organisations, and with the United States (Król-Mazur 2013, pp. 293–325; Grabowiecki and Fiedorczuk 2021, pp. 135–156). Russia regarded GUAM as a hostile operation by the West against its structures formed in the post-Soviet zone. It held a similarly hostile assessment of the Eastern Partnership, established in 2009 at the initiative of Poland and Sweden within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy and with the participation of Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia (Miszewski 2019, pp. 63–85; Szczot, Jaśkiewicz, and Lebediuk 2018; *EU Policies…* 2014).

The policies of Ukrainian authorities regarding Western structures – the European Union and NATO – since the beginnings of an independent Ukraine have been ambiguous, for political, social, and economic reasons (Sawicz 2010, pp. 158–168; Malak 2010, pp. 169–174; Kravchenko 2010, pp. 201–206). Since 1991, Russia has consistently threatened Ukraine with political and economic consequences for its possible accession to the EU and NATO (Vlasenko 2010, pp. 65–70; Boratyn 2010, pp. 71–78). The post-Soviet authorities of Ukraine have attempted to maneuver between the East and the West. In 1991, Ukraine became a member of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council. After giving up its Soviet-era nuclear arsenal (the Budapest Memorandum 1994) in return for guarantees of security and territorial integrity from Russia, the United States, and Great Britain allowed Ukraine to conclude the

partnership agreement with NATO (NATO-Ukraine Commission 1997). In 1994, a partnership and cooperation agreement was signed between Ukraine and the EU. At the first Ukraine-EU summit in 1997 in Kyiv, then-president Leonid Kuchma confirmed Ukraine's desire to be associated with the EU. In 1999, work began on the establishment of a free-trade zone. The EU adopted a common strategy towards Ukraine focused on a market economy, democracy, and human rights. In 2000, the EU confirmed its willingness to enter into negotiations on an Association Agreement with Ukraine. Due to the oligarchisation of the economy, corruption, the absence of independent courts, and violations of democratic order (such as the murder in 2000 of the journalist Georgiy Gongadze, in which the highest authorities were involved, including president Kuchma), the EU proposed in 2003 that Ukraine merely participate in the European Neighbourhood Policy (Legucka 2010, pp. 29–33; Zotkin 2015, pp. 201–214). Up to 2004, the highest priority of the EU was the accession of the Central European states, leaving Ukraine as an item of secondary interest. There were fears regarding the impact of its agricultural output and corruption, as well as its dependence on Russia, which perceived Ukraine as its own security zone against the West (Kirsenko 2010, pp. 9–14). After the so-called Orange Revolution, president Viktor Yushchenko confirmed the aspirations of Ukraine to join the EU and NATO, aspirations which had been sidelined by Leonid Kuchma. When in 2008 Ukraine became a member of the World Trade Organisation, the EU began negotiations with it on the subject of a free-trade zone, an Association Agreement, and visa-free movement. President Yushchenko in turn announced a NATO Membership Action Plan. At a summit in Bucharest in 2008, the NATO member states did not accept the Action Plans for Ukraine and Georgia (Jureńczyk 2019, pp. 117–119; Bajor 2010, pp. 207–214). The conflict between president Yushchenko and prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko further delayed the integration of Ukraine and the West (Figura 2010, pp. 79–87). Both of these were leaders of pro-western parties and competed for the leadership of the country. The Ukrainian political scene was also divided by the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and by the conflict with Gazprom, which demanded payment of Ukraine's debts while the country was embroiled in an economic crisis, namely the global financial crisis of 2008 (Kubaczyk and Solak 2010, pp. 46–47, 56–57). Russia forced Ukraine to accept higher gas prices after the "gas war" of 2008–2009 – Putin-Tymoshenko agreement (Makowska 2010, pp. 197–200). The EU merely proposed that Ukraine take part in the

Eastern Partnership at the initiative of Poland and Sweden (Miszewski 2019, pp. 63–85; Cianciara 2014). In 2010, president Yanukovych announced the neutrality of Ukraine. In the resolution adopted by the Verkhovna Rada on the basis for domestic and foreign policy (2010), mention of the accession of Ukraine to NATO and the EU disappeared. This was influenced by the imprisonment of the former prime minister Tymoshenko (accused of fraud and losses incurred to Naftogaz of Ukraine relating to a contract with the Russian Gazprom). In 2012, the EU again proposed the conclusion of an Association Agreement with Ukraine. In November 2013, under threat of closure of the Russian domestic market to Ukraine and a hike in Russian raw materials prices, president Yanukovych declined to sign the Association Agreement with the EU at the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius. Armenia also declined to conclude the agreement under pressure from Russia and instead joined the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. At this same 2013 summit in Vilnius, Association Agreements with Moldova and Georgia were initialed. Russia did not wish to allow the integration of Ukraine with the EU and NATO as it was aiming at Ukraine's vassalisation (Doroszko 2015, pp. 239–245). Russia's plan to end the crisis in Ukraine in 2014 after Yanukovych was removed from power included the following elements and demands: implementation of the agreement of 21 February 2014 (return to the 2004 constitution with restrictions on the president's powers; a new government within 10 days; presidential elections by the end of December 2014; and an agreement accepted by the opposition, president Yanukovych, the EU, and Russia; the agreement did not come into force after Yanukovych fled to Russia); the end of street protests, evacuation of buildings occupied by radical groups, their disarmament and initiation of investigations into acts of violence; the convening of a Constitutional Assembly representing all regions of Ukraine to draft a new constitution; adoption of Ukraine's status as a federal and neutral (in political and military terms) state; the granting of Ukrainian and Russian the status of official languages; the granting of autonomy to regions in the political, economic, financial, cultural, and foreign relations spheres, and granting them the right to freely elect legislative and executive authorities; respect for minority rights and non-interference in religious matters; local and parliamentary elections after the adoption of the constitution; the right of Crimea to freely choose its status; and guarantees from Russia, the EU, the US, and the UN Security Council for Ukraine's federal system,

Leonid Kravchuk
(1934–2022),
president of Ukraine
(1991–1994) (2019).
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sovereignty, territorial integrity, and neutrality. As a result of the severe political crisis (the Revolution of Dignity, Euromaidan), the Ukrainian parliament removed Viktor Yanukovych from power on 22 February 2014. Prime minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk and president Petro Poroshenko (2014–2019) signed an Association Agreement and an agreement on a free-trade zone with the EU in 2014, just as Moldova and Georgia had done before. Membership in the EU and NATO once again became a priority of the new Ukrainian authorities. As a result, Russian president Putin terminated the free-trade agreement with Ukraine. The EU was not inclined to revise its wait-and-see policy regarding Ukrainian membership despite the confrontational policy of Russia, and the First Russia-Ukraine War 2014–2015 (Bushuev and Cöllen, 2015; *Russia…* 2015). In the amended Ukrainian constitution of 2019, norms were defined regarding the strategic course towards EU and NATO membership. At a NATO summit in Brussels in 2021, the decision on the possibility of Ukrainian and Georgian membership was upheld. Ukraine submitted an application for membership in NATO on 30 September 2022, after the Russian annexation of the occupied territories. At a NATO summit in 2023 in Vilnius, Ukraine did not obtain acceptance for fast track membership by the end of the Russia-Ukraine War.

Despite the ban of 1991 on the communist party in Ukraine, post-communist forces had enormous influence on Ukrainian political and economic life (Szweda 2015, pp. 162–175). The presidents of Ukraine Leonid Kravchuk (1991–1994) and Leonid Kuchma (1994–2005) had both been members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). The Ukrainian economy was highly dependent on Russian export markets and energy resources. Ukrainian oligarchs had ties

Viktor Yanukovych, former president of Ukraine (2010–2014) (left), Vladimir Putin, then Russian Prime Minister (right). Istanbul, Turkey (8 June 2010). Photo: UkrPictures / Shutterstock ID 1574283172
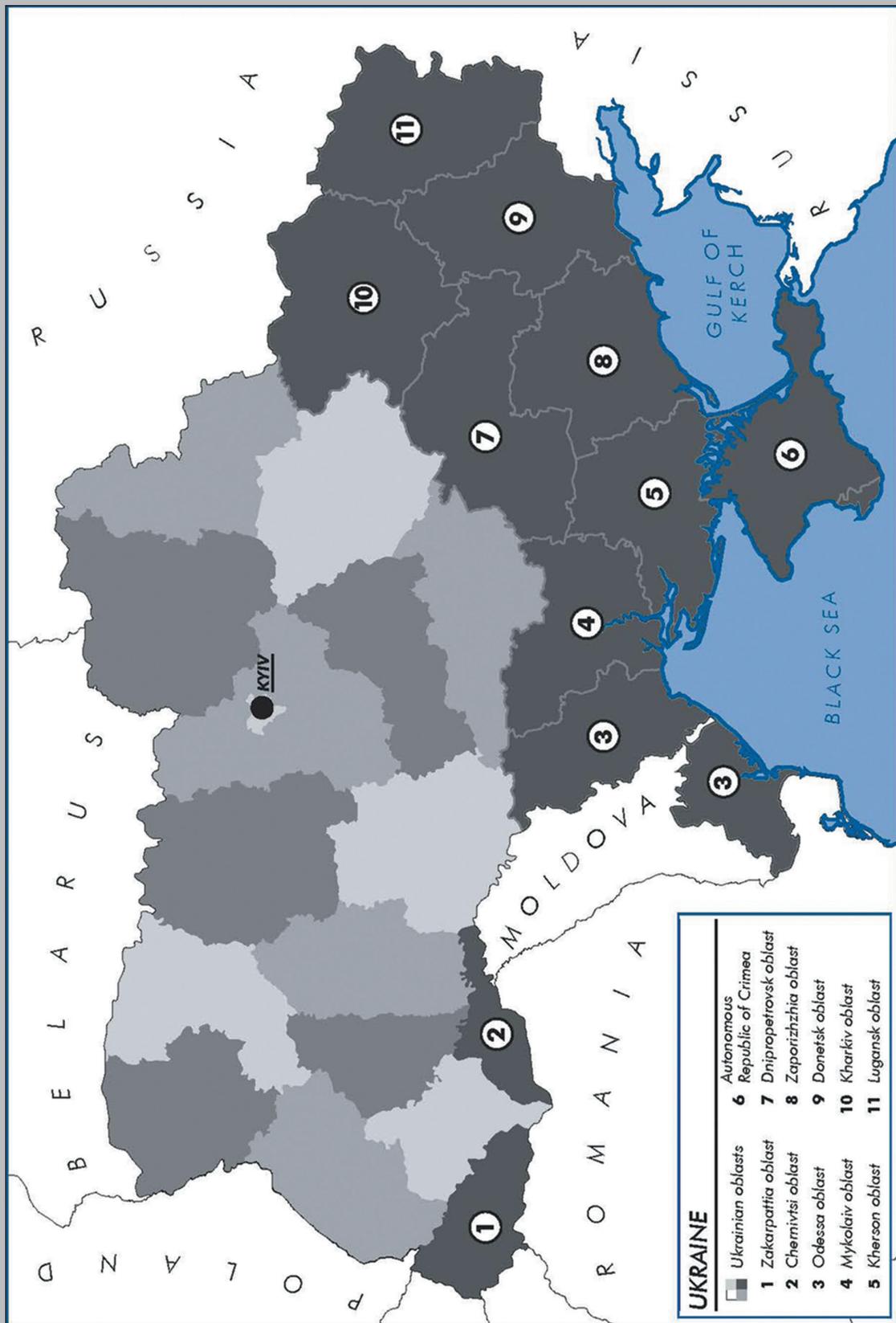
with Russian political and economic elites. The Socialist Party of Ukraine, established in 1991, did not become an alternative for former members or sympathisers of the CPSU, and did not obtain significant support within Ukrainian society. In 1996, a group split off from it led by Nataliya Vitrenko, a former member of the CPSU, who created the anti-Western and pro-Russian Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine, financed by Russia. The party was delegalised in 2022. The most powerful party in Ukraine after the Orange Revolution (2004) was the pro-Russian and pro-Soviet Communist Party of Ukraine, which found its greatest support in central and south-eastern Ukraine. The new CPU was in favor of Ukraine's participation in structures created by Russia in the post-Soviet zone. It was also in favor of the equal status of the Russian and Ukrainian languages and the federalisation of Ukraine. It opposed the policy of Ukrainisation of the state and Ukraine's integration with NATO and the EU, twice supporting the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych in the presidential elections in 2004 and 2010. The CPU considered the Orange Revolution (2004) and the Revolution of Dignity (2013–2014) as Western interference in Ukraine's affairs, and Yanukovych's removal from power in February 2014 as a coup d'état. In 2015, the CPU was delegalised.

Separatist Areas and Aspirations for Autonomy in Independent Ukraine

Along its path to independence, Ukraine has seen the appearance of historical, ethnic, political, and economic separatisms (Krpan 2022, pp. 131–151). The driving factors behind these events were the activation of the outgoing Soviet political and economic elites, who presented among local communities an idealised view of the Soviet past, as well as the Russian minority which did not accept an independent Ukrainian state, and Russian media and cultural interference (such as demands to put Russian on an equal footing with Ukrainian and to maintain Soviet symbols in Ukraine). These appeared in Ukraine mainly in the Crimean Oblast, where Soviet authorities had allowed the restoration into the Ukrainian SSR in February 1991 of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, which as the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic had been liquidated in 1946, and in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (Donbas). In turn, efforts to obtain autonomy in some form became apparent in the Chernivtsi and Zakarpattia oblasts (Marples 2015, pp. 8–15; Voytyuk 2021, pp. 401–402).

I. The Autonomous Republic of Crimea

After World War II, the population of Crimea was dominated by ethnic Russians (Chazbijewicz 2001, pp. 48–61). In 1944, based on accusations of treason in the form of support for the Third Reich, Soviet authorities deported some 300,000 of the native inhabitants of Crimea, including 200,000 Crimean Tatars and 50,000 Germans, as well as Armenians, Kurds, Greeks, Bulgarians, Turks, Persians, and Roma (Olszański 2014, pp. 1–6; Romańczuk 2020, pp. 104–108). After 1989, the Soviet authorities allowed the Crimean Tatars to resettle in Crimea (Chazbijewicz 2001, pp. 200–205). After Ukraine's declaration of independence in August 1991, the pro-Russian separatist authorities of the Crimean ASSR announced in September a declaration of state sovereignty. In February 1992, the Crimean ASSR was transformed into the independent Republic of Crimea, and in May a constitution was adopted. Kyiv maintained authority over Crimea but agreed to the establishment of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea with a pro-Russian majority in the authoritative body in Simferopol, the Supreme Council of the ARC (parliament)

Legend:

UKRAINE

Ukrainian oblasts

1 Zakarpattia oblast
2 Chernivtsi oblast
3 Odessa oblast
4 Mykolaiv oblast
5 Kherson oblast
6 Autonomous Republic of Crimea
7 Dnipropetrovsk oblast
8 Zaporizhzhia oblast
9 Donetsk oblast
10 Kharkiv oblast
11 Lugansk oblast

KYIV

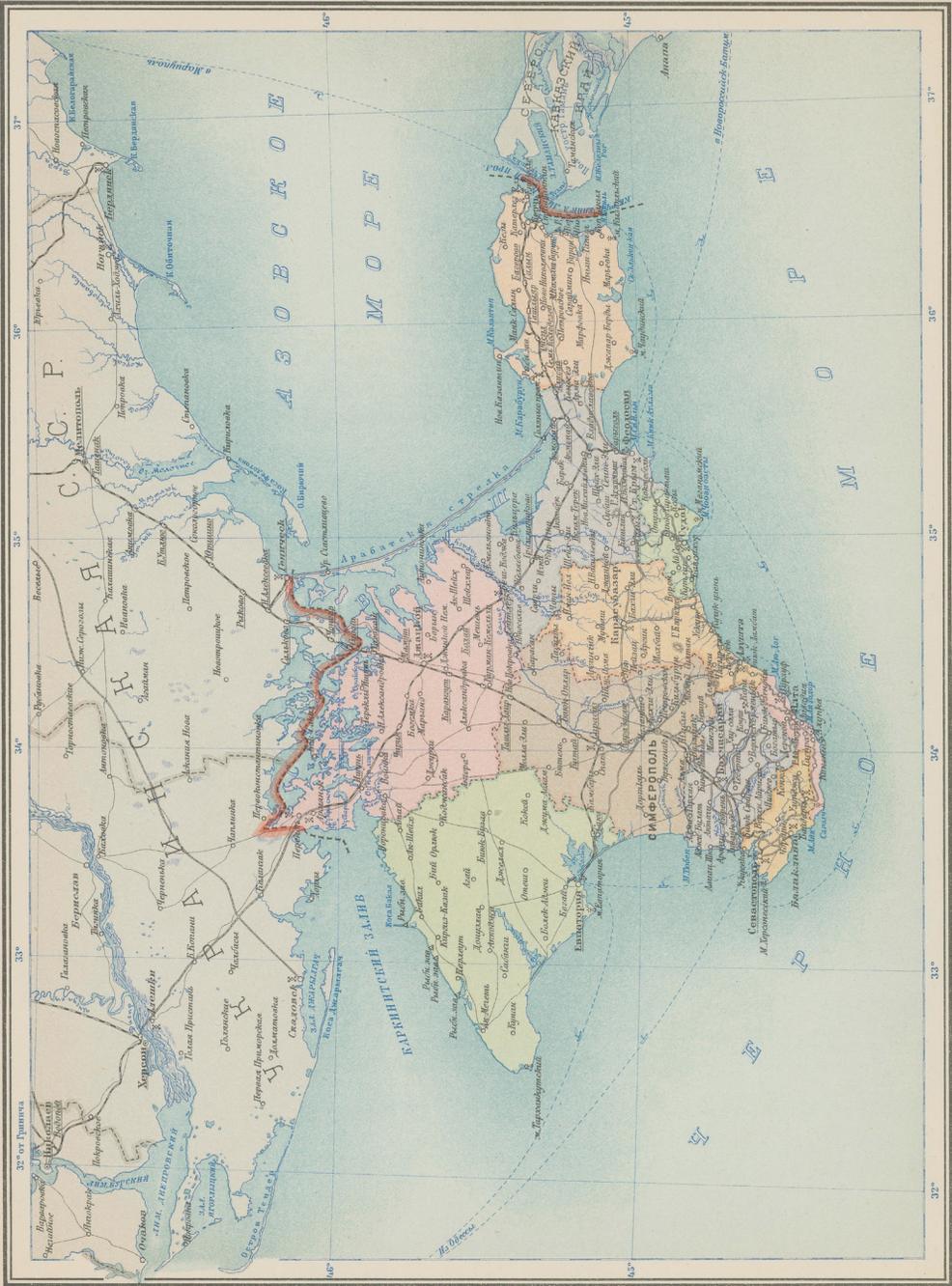RUSSIA
BELARUS
POLAND
ROMANIA
MOLDOVA
GULF OF KERCH
BLACK SEA

and the Crimean government of the ARC, based on the constitution of the ARC of 21 October 1998 (*Vseukrayins'kyi…* 2001). In the 1990s, Russia withdrew its support for the separatist authorities in Crimea due to the internal difficulties it was experiencing (the constitutional crisis of 1993, the First Chechen War of 1994–1996) and because it was involved in other separatist conflicts in the post-Soviet zone.

The price for keeping Crimea was the agreement of the Ukrainian government to continue to allow the Black Sea Fleet to be stationed at its base in Sevastopol, which was under the direct authority of Kyiv (Mironowicz 2014, pp. 207–208; Rogozińska and Olech 2020, pp. 68–69; *Vseukrayins'kyi…* 2001). The Ukrainian-Russian agreement on the status and conditions of the Russian Federation's Black Sea Fleet's presence in Ukraine, signed on 28 May 1997, allowed the Russian base to operate until 2017 and a troop strength of 12,500. President Viktor Yushchenko (2005–2010) announced plans for its liquidation after the expiration of the agreement. In Kharkiv in April 2010, presidents Viktor Yanukovych of Ukraine (2010–2014) and Dmitry Medvedev of Russia signed the Kharkiv Pact. The period of stay of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Crimea was extended by 25 years, beginning 28 May 2017, with automatic renewal for five-year periods in the absence of a written notification of termination by one of the parties to the agreement, that is until 2042 with an option to extend until 2047. Russia was to supply gas to Ukraine at preferential prices until 2020.

The Russian media claimed that after the removal of president Viktor Yanukovych from power in February 2014 as the result of a "coup d'état," power in Kyiv had been taken over by "fascists" (Hutchings, Szostek 2015, pp. 173–185). On 23 February, Ukrainian citizens of Russian descent organised demonstrations inspired by Russia in Kerch, Simferopol, and Sevastopol, demanding the organisation of an independence referendum by the autonomous authorities of Crimea. Crimean Russians began to establish "self-defense forces." The inhabitants of Crimea obtained the right to apply for Russian citizenship and Ukrainian soldiers were permitted to join the Russian army. Russia used its base in Sevastopol to take control of Crimean cities. From 26 February, Russian soldiers while not wearing insignia occupied strategic points and protected pro-Russian demonstrations. After Russian forces took control of the seat of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea on 27 February, pro-Russian authorities created the appearance of legitimacy of Russia's operations

in Crimea in the face of international public opinion. On 6 March, the Supreme Council of the ARC passed a resolution on the incorporation of Crimea into Russia and for this purpose announced a referendum planned for 16 March (Wierzbowska-Miazga et al. 2014). The combined Supreme Council of the ARC and the City Council of Sevastopol adopted a declaration of the independence of Crimea on 11 March. In it, they referred to the declaration of independence of Kosovo (2008) and the ruling of the International Court of Justice (2010) which stated that the unilateral declaration of independence adopted by Kosovo had not violated international law. The pace of Russian actions was determined by the attitude of the Ukrainian authorities towards the illegal actions of the ARC authorities and the operations of Russian forces in Crimea and the Black Sea – Ukrainian forces in Crimea numbered about 15,000 soldiers, while the Russian Black Sea Fleet numbered roughly 11,500; in mid-March, the Ukrainian authorities estimated the number of Russian soldiers in Crimea at 22,000, while American authorities estimated this number at 45,000 (Uehling 2015, pp. 66–75; Kathanowski 2015, pp. 76–84; Skrukwa 2021, pp. 474–92). Ukraine undertook no military operations against the Russian aggression in Crimea for fear of a Russian attack on Donbas. Russian authorities claimed that they were ensuring peace for national minorities and Russian citizens in Crimea, who had been threatened by the "nationalist" government in Kyiv supported by "fascist right-wing" Ukrainian organisations. The March referendum was monitored by international observers from Russia and Russia-friendly countries, as well as international political organisations financed by the Russian authorities (turnout was reportedly 84%, with 96.6% of voters allegedly in favor of joining Russia). Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars boycotted the referendum. The Supreme Council of the ARC, dissolved by order of the Ukrainian parliament, declared the independence of the Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol on 17 March. A day later, the authorities signed an agreement for the incorporation of Crimea into Russia, which took effect on 21 March. The Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol became the Crimean Federal District (in 2016 joined with the Southern Federal District). The international community did not recognise the referendum or the annexation of Crimea by Russia. These were recognised only by Afghanistan, Cuba, Nicaragua, North Korea, Syria, and Venezuela; states with an anti-Western alignment and perceived as allies of Russia.

From the moment of their return to Crimea, the Crimean Tatars did not support the pro-Russian authorities in Crimea or its incorporation into Russia. They were not swayed by Soviet nostalgia. The first Congress of Tatars in Crimea in 1991 had recognised the peninsula as their national homeland. However, until 2014 the authorities in Kyiv had de facto not supported the repatriation of Crimean Tatars or their adaptation to life in Crimea, adopting what was in fact an unfriendly stance regarding the Tatars (see Krawetz 2024; Olszański 2014). The Crimean authorities on their part hindered their arrival and resettlement in the peninsula with administrative decisions (Chazbijewicz 2001, pp. 217–225; 235). Disputes with the Crimean authorities occurred, mainly regarding the return of former Tatar real estate properties and the rights of Tatars as an indigenous people. It was only after the loss of Crimea to Russia on 20 March 2014 that the Ukrainian parliament legally recognised the institutions of the Crimean Tatars which had been operating since 1991 and granted them legal guarantees for their cultural and national activities ("On guarantees of the rights of the Crimean Tatar people as a part of the State of Ukraine"). In November 2015, this same institution recognised the deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944 from Crimea to Central Asia as genocide, and so 18 May was made the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Crimean Tatar Genocide (Romańczuk 2020, pp. 111–112). In 2014, the Crimean Tatars publicly denounced the Russian invasion of Crimea and the anti-Ukrainian actions of the autonomous authorities in Crimea. Previously, they had supported the Revolution of Dignity (Euromaidan 2013–2014). They had expressed their desire to remain within the Ukrainian state. The Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People did not recognise the results of the pro-Russian independence referendum organised by the Republic of Crimea or its annexation by Russia. The anti-Russian stance of the Crimean Tatars did not escape the notice of the Russian authorities. Initially, they tried to win over the Crimean Tatar community through certain concessions regarding national-cultural and religious affairs (such as the construction of a mosque in Simferopol). However, the majority of Crimean Tatar society remained either anti-Russian or at least passive in regards to the process of the de-Ukrainisation of the peninsula (Romańczuk 2020, pp. 114–115). Hard-liners were subject to repression by the Russian authorities. The Crimean Tatar community joined the political and armed struggle for the restoration of Ukrainian statehood in Crimea (Voytyuk 2016, pp. 209–228; Zasztowt 2022, pp. 155–164).

Pre-war Autonomous Crimean Soviet Socialist Republic (part of the Russian Federal Soviet Socialist Republic) (1928). *Atlas Soyuza Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik*. Moscow: Izdanie TsIK SSSR, 1928. National Library, Warsaw, Poland

II. Donbas (the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts) and Other Oblasts of South-Eastern Ukraine

Donbas (the Donetsk Coal Basin, Donetsk Basin) is a historical and economic region situated mainly in Ukraine, covering the Donetsk, Luhansk, and partly the Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, and Poltava oblasts (roughly 50,000 km^2), and in Russia as a part of the Rostov Oblast (roughly 10,000 km^2) (Gil 2018, pp. 247–256; Baca-Pogorzelska and Potocki 2020). Donbas experienced rapid economic development in the 19th century. It had enormous reserves of natural resources, mainly coal, which provided the impetus for the beginnings of its coal extraction, metallurgy, and machine industries. Separatism vis-a-vis the central government in Kyiv smoldered in Donbas since the beginnings of the Ukrainian state (Kuromiya 1998). It was mainly of an economic and regional nature. After the Ukrainian declaration of independence in August 1991, the regional elites in Donbas demanded in 1991 to remain within the USSR or to be granted autonomy within Ukraine; in the independence referendum of 1991, 84% of the votes in Donbas were cast for the independence of Ukraine, while in Luhansk this number was 83.9% (Adamovych 2014). After the collapse of the USSR, pro-Soviet political elites wanted to retain power and adapt economically to the new reality. They emphasised the economic and ethnic-cultural specificity of south-eastern Ukraine, which in their opinion should have had territorial autonomy. They took advantage of post-Soviet state economic assets, leading to the oligarchisation of the Ukrainian economy. To this aim, they exploited separatism to consolidate clan and regional political and economic power against the central government in Kyiv. During the elections to the Verkhovna Rada in March 1994, the regional authorities in Donetsk and Luhansk conducted local consultative referendums. Voters were asked whether they would agree to the federalisation of Ukraine, the recognition of Russian as an official language equal to Ukrainian, the equal status in administration and education of the Russian and Ukrainian languages in Donetsk and Luhansk, and closer integration of Ukraine with the CIS. To all of these questions more than 80% of respondents in these oblasts answered yes (Gevarin 2007). The regional authorities in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, pro-Russian parties and organisations financed by Russia kept nostalgia for the Soviet era alive among the inhabitants and constantly stressed the separateness of the south-eastern oblasts from the western oblasts of Ukraine. The latter they

defined as nationalist, Banderite, and fascist. This anti-Ukrainian message was amplified by the Russian media, which had free access to Ukraine (Włodkowska-Bagan 2012, pp. 36–61).

Pro-Soviet economic and political elites supported the Party of Regional Revival "Labour Solidarity of Ukraine", formed from the combination of various regional political parties in 2000 and since 2001 known as the Party of Regions (promoting the federalisation of Ukraine, the equal status of the Russian language with Ukrainian, the protection of the rights of the Russian minority, rejection of the Ukrainisation of the country), and supported by Russia. This became one of the most powerful political parties at the expense of the weakened communists. It was led by the so-called Donetsk Clan (Karmazina, Bevz, and Rotar 2018), a quasi-mafia political and economic grouping (operating in south-eastern Ukraine, mainly in industrial regions, having emerged from the former Soviet political elites, among others including Volodymyr Rybal, a former member of the CPSU in Donetsk and Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada (2012–2014), Mykola Azarov, Viktor Yanukovych, and Rinat Akhmetov. After V. Yanukovych's loss in the 2004 presidential election (and the outbreak of the Orange Revolution as a result of the falsified second round of voting) to Viktor Yushchenko, representatives of the Party of Regions in the Verkhovna Rada and in oblast-level assemblies of south-eastern Ukraine proclaimed the South-East Ukrainian Autonomous Republic in Luhansk in 2004. They asked Russia for assistance in maintaining the new structure (*Odesskie…* 2004, *Yanukovich…* 2004; *Khar'kov…* 2004).

Created in 2005 by Oleh Frolov and Andrei Purgin, the pro-Russian separatist organisation called the Social Movement "Donetsk Republic" (Obshchestvennoe dvizheniye "Donetskaya Respublika"; *Общественное движение "Донецкая республика"*) demanded autonomy for eastern Ukraine and a federal system, claiming heritage from the Donetsk-Krivoy Rog Soviet Republic (1918). The organisation had outposts in the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, Dnipropetrovsk, and Mykolaiv oblasts. For pursuing a policy of Russian irridentism, its members were imprisoned. In 2007, they raised the flag of the Donetsk Republic and demanded incorporation into Russia. In 2012, they opened an "embassy" in Moscow and issued "passports." They took part in pro-Russian irridentism (Boyars'ka 2015, pp. 454–461; Margvelashvili and Frolov 2006). In November 2014, the Donetsk Republic movement was successful in elections to the separatist parliament of the Donetsk People's Republic (the People's Council of the DPR), unrecognised

by Ukraine or the international community, winning 64.43% of the votes – or 68 out of 100 seats (*Glavoy…* 2014). In September 2022, after the annexation of the Donetsk Oblast by Russia, the organisation was absorbed into the pro-Putin Russian political party United Russia (Vserossiyskaya politicheskaya partiya "Edinaya Rossiya"; *Всероссийская политическая пáртия "Едúная Россúя"*) (see *Bolee…* 2023).

After the removal from power of V. Yanukovych, Russia incited sabotage and armed actions in south-eastern Ukraine in defense of the Russian minority which allegedly was under pressure from the authorities in Kyiv, a so-called hybrid war, perhaps better termed a Russian special operation, in 2014–2015, (Forró 2019; Forró 2021; Pieniążek 2017). For its aspirations to join Western structures, Russia had already been threatening Ukraine with such actions since 2008 (the war with Georgia was also a warning for Ukraine). Pro-Russian forces organised demonstrations against the "fascisation" of Ukraine and the "government of nationalists" in Kyiv, including in Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Kherson, Donetsk, Luhansk, Mariupol, and Odessa. They were organised by the local authorities and security structures linked to the Party of Regions, the Communist Party of Ukraine, and pro-Russian organisations. At these demonstrations, Russian operations in Crimea were shown support. Russian flags were displayed on public buildings. Demands for the autonomy of the south-eastern oblasts of Ukraine and its federalisation were heard. Pro-Russian militias attacked public gatherings in support for the authorities in Kyiv. On the day of the referendum in Crimea, improvised plebiscites were held in the cities of south-eastern Ukraine in favor of the idea of Novorossiya (Kinstler 2014). Anti-government demonstration (promoting the slogans "coup in Kyiv" and "Yanukovych the legitimate president") took on irredentist features. After the incorporation of Crimea into Russia, there were military actions in south-eastern Ukraine and demands for incorporation into Russia (Olszański 2014a). Pro-Russian militias occupied Ukrainian institutions and attacked the headquarters of the state militia and Security Service of Ukraine – the most well-known pro-Russian militias were Oplot, Vostok, Kalmius, Sparta, and Somalia in the DPR and Odessa, Prizrak, Zarya, Vityaz, Rus, and Modjahed as well as numerous Cossack regiments in the LPR (Piechal 2015, p. 2). The pro-Russian irridentists received military support from Russian saboteurs (Russian soldiers without insignia) and from volunteers from Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Russia (Cossacks,

Chechens, Tajiks, Ossetians, and Armenians). The Security Service of Ukraine (SSU) informed Kyiv that the separatists were led by employees and soldiers as well as agents of the GRU (Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation), the VV MVD FR (Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation), the FSB FR (Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation), and the SVR FR (Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation).

On 6 April 2014, pro-Russian separatists simultaneously attacked the buildings of Ukrainian regional and municipal authorities and the SSU in Kharkiv, Donetsk (Donbas People's Militia, Donbas Volunteer Army), and Luhansk (South-East Army, North-South Army). After gaining control of these, on 6 April they announced the creation of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the parliament of the Luhansk People's Republic. The Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) was officially proclaimed on 27 April at a separatist rally (Konończuk 2014). The authorities of the DPR and LPR scheduled a referendum for 11 May and the following day declared their independence. They requested the dispatch of peacekeeping forces from Russia. Both separatist republics were organised, directed, and financed by Russia (Lyubashenko 2016, pp. 51–68; Piechal and Strzelecki 2017). The armed forces and military and civilian intelligence services of Russia were responsible for organizing the armed forces and security structures of the DPR and LPR. (Nikonorov 2015). With the assistance of Russia, pro-Russian separatists attacked further Ukrainian oblasts of Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Odessa. They were supported in this by soldiers of the armed forces of Russia (for example, the Special Purpose Forces of the Russian Federation, the so-called Spetsnaz, subordinate to the 8th Directorate of the GRU). The former prime minister of the DPR, Alexander Borodai, stated that without Russia's help, the DPR and LPR would not have been created (Coynash 2019).

The pro-Russian Kharkiv People's Republic, established on 7 April, was liquidated on the same day by the SSU (without casualties). Similarly, anti-Ukrainian attempts to establish so-called people's republics were thwarted by the Ukrainian security services and Euromaidan supporters in the first half of May 2014 in Odessa and Mariupol. In Odessa, this resulted in some tragic events. As a result of skirmishes between supporters and opponents of Euromaidan, a fire broke out in the Trade Unions House in Odessa resulting the deaths of 42 opponents of Euromaidan. The inept investigation conducted by the Ukrainian municipal security services has so far failed to punish those

"Independence referendum" polling station in Donetsk, Ukraine (11 May 2014). Photo: Denis Kornilov / Shutterstock ID 192031832

responsible for this tragedy. In the meantime, Russian propaganda has exploited this tragic event to accuse Ukrainian authorities of a cover-up protecting the perpetrators (*Desyat'...* 2024).

On 24 May 2014, the LPR and DPR signed an agreement in Donetsk on the creation of the Federal Republic of Novorossiya (Pieniążek 2015). On 22 May, at a convention of the Novorossiya Party formed on 13 May 2014, Pavel Gubarev announced the unification of the south-eastern regions of Ukraine: Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Dnipropetrovsk, Mykolaiv, and Odessa (for data on the population and languages of these regions, see Appendix and *Vseukrayins'kyi...* 2001; on the identity of the inhabitants of the Donbas regions, see, among others, Studenna-Skrukwa 2014). The capital of the self-proclaimed state was Donetsk, and its president Valery Kaurov. The planned nationalisation of industry in Donbas was announced. The declaration establishing the confederation was read out the day before the presidential elections in Ukraine. After the signing of the Minsk Protocol on the ceasefire (Ukraine, Russia, and representatives of the DPR and LPR), the operations of the Novorossiya FR ceased in May 2015. This decision was made due to a lack of support from the inhabitants of south-eastern Ukraine, the weakness of pro-Russian forces outside the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and armed factional fighting among the separatists. The internet site of the parliament of

Novorossiya was taken offline (Pawłowska 2015). Mere pro-Russian propaganda in Ukraine, political forces financed by Russia since 1991, and a significant percentage of the population with an ambiguous national identity (a bilingual Ukrainian population that uses Russian on a daily basis) were not enough for Russia to occupy south-eastern Ukraine with its Russian minority (Białobłocki 2016, pp. 61–80; Pietnoczka 2018, pp. 1–14). Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 (the First Russo-Ukrainian War) strengthened the national identity of Ukrainians who use Russian as their first language. This allowed Ukraine to mount strong resistance during the Second Russo-Ukrainian War after the Russian invasion in 2022 (Plokhy 2023B).

On 13 April 2014, Ukrainian authorities began anti-terrorist operations aimed at liquidating the DPR and LPR. The annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas demonstrated the weakness of the Ukrainian security forces and army, among other reasons due to Russian infiltration, and of state institutions (Olbrycht and Chmura 2018, pp.73–84; Wilk 2017, pp. 8–11; *Pokerowa…* 2025). The Ukrainian anti-terrorist operation resulted in 2014 in the recovery of 75% of the territories previously occupied by separatists. At that point, the Russian army joined the conflict on their side. Russia denied any involvement of its armed forces in south-eastern Ukraine. It called the armed actions in the area a popular uprising and civil war against the nationalist government in Kyiv (elected democratically, unlike in Russia), supported by anti-semitic and fascist Ukrainian groups (Machnikowski 2014, pp. 24–26). The armed phase of the conflict in Ukraine ended on 5 September 2014 with the signing of a ceasefire agreement in Minsk by Ukraine, Russia, the OSCE, the DPR, and the LPR (the so-called Minsk Contact Group). This agreement was not implemented, so on 12 February 2015, another agreement was signed in Minsk (known as Minsk II) with the aim of ending the conflict in Donbas. The first agreement signed by the Minsk Contact Group contained a set of measures aimed at de-escalating the conflict and restoring Kyiv's authority, while granting autonomy to the DPR and LPR. In return, Ukraine was to regain control of the Russian-Ukrainian border. The second agreement was to be overseen by France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine (the so-called Normandy Format). Ukraine was obliged to introduce a federal system by the end of 2015, with special rights for the DPR and LPR, though not covering the entire Donetsk and Luhansk regions (Kardaś and Konończuk 2015).

The Minsk Protocols resulted in the dependence of Ukraine on Russia. Both of the breakaway republics became para-states. Russia

was not named as the aggressor but rather as a peacekeeper in an alleged civil war in Ukraine (Pełczyńska-Nałęcz, Buras 2017, pp. 1–3). A summit of the Normandy Format was convened on 9 December 2019 for the first time since 2016, indicative of the impasse which had been reached. This meeting in Paris resulted in a declaration that the Minsk Protocols would remain the basis for peace (Chawryło and Iwański 2019; Pełczyńska-Nałęcz, Buras 2017, pp. 5–7). It was the last meeting in this format.

In 2014–2018, Ukraine conducted an anti-terrorist operation against pro-Russian separatists in Donbas, who sought to take complete control of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions by force of arms. In January 2018, the Ukrainian parliament adopted a resolution on Ukraine's state sovereignty in the temporarily occupied territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The Ukrainian anti-terrorist operation conducted by the SSU in Donbas was renamed Operation Joint Forces, led by the Ukrainian military to liberate the occupied territories of Ukraine. It was conducted until 22 February 2022, the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

The DPR and LPR (2014–2022) were bilaterally recognised by Russia (21 February), Syria (29 June), and North Korea (13 July 2022), as well as by the pro-Russian para-states of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. After this further aggression of Russia against Ukraine and after the fictitious referendums of 27 September, Russia annexed the DPR and LPR along with the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts on 30 September 2022. The Russian Duma ratified the annexations on 3 October. The UN Secretary General António Guterres declared the Russian annexation plan to be in violation of international law on 29 September. In the UN Security Council, Russia vetoed a resolution condemning the annexation of a part of Ukraine as a violation of international law. The UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on 12 October 2022 during an extraordinary session condemning Russia for this illegal annexation with a vote of 143 from 193. Belarus, Syria, Nicaragua, and North Korea stood by Russia. China, India, and 33 other states, mainly from Africa, abstained, while 10 did not take part in the vote. On 23 February 2023, in a vote in the UN General Assembly 141 states voted for a resolution to end the war with the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine. Seven UN member states voted against this resolution (Belarus, Eritrea, Mali, Nicaragua, North Korea, Syria, and Russia), while 32 abstained (including China and India), with 13 not taking part in the vote (Zaręba 2022, pp. 1–2; Menkiszak, Domańska, and Żochowski 2022).

III. Aspirations for Autonomy: the Zakarpattia Oblast

The Zakarpattia Oblast (Transcarpathia), with an area of 12,700 km² and a population of over 1.25 million (2001), with its capital in Uzhhorod (117,300), has historical traditions of separateness and a multi-ethnic composition resulting from the region's changing national affiliation (2001): Ukrainians (including Rusyns) 1.01 million (80.5%), Hungarians 151,500 (12.1%), Romanians (including Moldovans) 32,100 (2.6%), Russians 31,000 (2.5%), Roma 14,000 (1.1%), Slovaks 5,600 (0.5%), and Germans 3,500 (0.3%). The Transcarpathian region comprises the historical lands of Subcarpathian Rus and Northern Maramureş, as well as two strips belonging to the former Czechoslovakia – one along the border with Slovakia and Poland to the west and southwest of the Uzh Valley, and another along the border with Slovakia and Hungary, south of Uzhhorod, with the town of Chop. Before the lands now comprising the Zakarpattia Oblast became part of Ukraine, they belonged to the Kingdom of Hungary, the Austrian Monarchy, the Austrian Empire, Austria-Hungary (until 1918), Czechoslovakia (1918–1938), the Czechoslovak Republic (1938–1939, autonomous Carpathian Ukraine), an independent Carpatho-Ukraine (14–18 March 1939), which was liquidated by Hungary with the help of Poland (Samuś, Badziak, and Matwiejew 1998; Dąbrowski 2007), Hungary (1939–1944), and Soviet Ukraine (1945–1991). In Polish, Romanian, Slovak, Hungarian, and Czech nomenclature, Rus is referred to as Carpathian or Subcarpathian, while in Ukrainian it is referred to as Transcarpathian, which is not only due to its geographical location. The multi-ethnic Zakarpattia Oblast is among the poorest regions of Ukraine. It has an agricultural character and poorly developed infrastructure, though it is rich in tourism and scenic assets. Against this background, the Hungarian ethnic minority, benefiting from assistance from Hungary, stands out (Jarnecki 2021, pp. 77–79).

The Ukrainian authorities classify the Carpatho-Rusyns as Ukrainians (ethnic composition: Lemkos, Rusyns of Szlachtowa, Uhrintsy, Zamieshantsy, Boykos, Hutsuls, Rusyns of Šariš in eastern Slovakia, Rusyns of Transcarpathia, and Rusyns of Pannonia). The Lemkos, Rusyns of Szlachtowa, and Boykos were mostly displaced in 1945 from Poland to the USSR, while the rest were forcibly displaced in 1947 to the former territories of the Third Reich transferred to Poland in 1945, being considered part of the Ukrainian nation

(without differentiating Carpatho-Rusyn ethnic groups). For the Carpatho-Rusyns, all these groups are part of the Rusyn nation, but in Poland, Slovakia, and Ukraine, they are considered separate ethnic groups (Kosiek 2020, pp. 383–411). Paul Robert Magocsi, an American historian, professor of political science, chairman of the World Congress of Rusyns (2005–2009), and Rusyn activist, is a proponent of the autonomy of the Zakarpattia Oblast. He considers the Carpatho-Rusyns to be a separate nationality without a state whose ethnic lands lie in Slovakia, Romania, Hungary, Poland, and Ukraine (Magocsi 2022). On the Polish-Slovak-Ukrainian border, a Lemko People's Republic of Rus existed, proclaimed on 5 December 1918 in Florynka (a village in Poland). This entity declined to join the West Ukrainian People's Republic. At the Paris Peace Conference (1919), its representatives favored an autonomous association with Czechoslovakia. Poland liquidated the republic forcibly in 1920.

In March 1991 in the Slovakian town of Medzilaborce, a social and cultural organisation was established, the World Council of Rusyns, at the First World Congress of Rusyns. The Carpatho-Rusyns do not feel themselves to be part of the Ukrainian nation. They do not see their historical origins in Kievan Rus, of which they were not a part. They consider themselves to be a separate East Slavic people, along with the Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians. The post-Soviet elites, with the support of the Carpathian Rusyn Society and the Hungarian Cultural Federation in Transcarpathia, sought autonomy for the region. In October 1991, the Rada of the Zakarpattia Oblast adopted a declaration on the autonomy of Transcarpathia (*Pro status…* 1991; Ostapec 2015, pp. 143–160; Pipasz 2011). Along with the referendum on Ukraine's independence (90.13% in favor of independence in Transcarpathia), a referendum was held on granting autonomy to the region. More than 78% of the inhabitants of Transcarpathia supported its territorial autonomy (with a turnout of 82.7%). Support of more than 80% was noted in municipalities with a Hungarian majority (*Pro status…* 1991; *Referendum…* 1991a). In March 1992, the authorities of the oblast sent a draft resolution to the authorities in Kyiv on Transcarpathian autonomy. Kyiv was inclined to agree only to territorial self-government, fearing similar demands from the Russian minority which would have threatened the cohesion of Ukraine. After the central authorities refused to grant this autonomy in May 1993, Carpatho-Rusyn leaders formed the Provisional Government of Subcarpathian Rus, with Ivan Turyanitsa as prime minister (Niewiadowski 1995; Turyanitsa 1999). He was

a member of the World Council of Rusyns (1993–2001), president of the Carpathian Rusyn Society (1992–2004), and a researcher at Uzhhorod State University. He died in April 2023. His government passed a declaration of accession to the Commonwealth of Independent States, which led to it being delegalised in August 1994 by the Ukrainian authorities. In March 2007, the Rada of the Zakarpattia Oblast recognised the existence of the Rusyn nationality (however, this was not recognised by the central authorities, and the declaration has no legal force). In 2012, the Rusyn language was recognised as a regional language. However, the majority of Ukrainian society and Ukrainian academia still consider them to be part of the Ukrainian nation (Malski and Zińko 2020, pp. 105–106). The Carpatho-Rusyns are organised in political, social, and cultural terms. They have their own representatives in the parliaments and local governments of Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Poland, and also have Rusyn cultural institutions (such as the Museum of Rusyn Culture in Prešov in Slovakia).

Russia has fueled Rusyn separatism. In 2007, Dmytro Sydor, a clergyman of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate, organised the Union of Rusyn Organisations of Transcarpathia, the "Soym of Subcarpathian Rusyns" (Riabow 2007). He claimed that there were not 10,000 Rusyns in Transcarpathia, as reported by the Ukrainian census (2001), but 800,000. He demanded that Rusyns have Rusyn programs on television and radio, that they be able to introduce additional subjects into the educational system for teaching the Rusyn language and its history, and that the Rusyn language be recognised as a regional language in Transcarpathia. The Rada of the oblast rejected his demands for the autonomy of the Zakarpattia Oblast. In 2008, Dmytro Sydor declared the independence of the Republic of Subcarpathian Rus, for which the national authorities accused him of threatening the state integrity of Ukraine. His activities were financed by Russia. Sydor demanded that Russia recognise the independence of Subcarpathian Rus. In 2012, he was sentenced to prison by court in Uzhhorod (*Svyashchenniku…* 2012; *Lideru…* 2012; *Rusiny…* 2011). On 10 September 2019, the then Czech president Miloš Zeman hosted a delegation in Prague representing Rusyns striving for autonomy from Ukraine which included Sydor, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the peace treaty with Austria in Saint Germain-en-Laye, which recognised the Subcarpathian Rus as a part of Czechoslovakia with the right to autonomy (*Zakarpatts'kyi…* 2019; Miszewski 2017, pp. 43–47).

In 2008, the self-proclaimed prime minister of the Subcarpathian Rus, Petro Hetsko, asked the Russian authorities to recognise the independence of the Subcarpathian Rus (this took place in a significant context, specifically the Russo-Georgian War and Russia's recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia). Russia made use of the "Rusyn prime minister" once again in 2014 during its aggression against Ukraine (Jarnecki 2021, pp. 80–88; *Ukraińscy...* 2015). The Rusyn community did not support his pro-Russian activities. They were interested in European integration due to the Rusyn diaspora in Central Europe. However, Russian aggression in 2014 and 2022 is worrying for the Rusyns, as well as other national minorities in Transcarpathia, due to conscription into the Ukrainian army and the possible material and political consequences for the region.

The Hungarian minority enjoyed cultural and national autonomy in Transcarpathia wherever it predominated and was able to use the Hungarian language on an equal footing with Ukrainian in the public space (Szczygieł and Klauziński 2018). This changed in 2017 after the adoption of the Law on Education by the Ukrainian parliament. Hungary accused Ukraine of using schools for the Ukrainisation of the Hungarian minority (Malski and Zińko 2020, pp. 112–113, 117). It has regularly intervened in affairs regarding the Hungarian minority, supporting it politically and financially. The Transcarpathian Hungarian Cultural Association (*Kárpátaljai Magyar Kulturális Szövetség*, KMKSZ) was established in 1989. In 1991, the KMKSZ established the Hungarian Democratic Union in Ukraine (*Ukrajnai Magyar Demokrata Szövetség*, UMDSZ). After splitting off from the KMKSZ in 2005, the UMDSZ founded the Hungarian Democratic Party of Ukraine (UMDP). At the same time, in 2005 the KMKSZ founded the Hungarian Party in Ukraine (*Ukrajnai Magyar Párt*, UMP). This is supported by the Fidesz party (*Magyar Polgári Szövetség,* Hungarian Civic Alliance) led by prime minister Viktor Orbán. In 2020, a dispute arose between Hungary and Ukraine as a result of the Hungarian government's open support for the nationalist Hungarian Party in Ukraine (UMP) in local elections (the UMP received 12% of the vote and 8 of the 64 seats on the Transcarpathian Regional Council, the most in its history). Ukrainian security services conducted a search of the UMP headquarters, which only served to intensify the conflict. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine (the Second Russo-Ukrainian War of 2022), Hungary has not provided military assistance to Ukraine like other NATO and EU members, and has consistently criticised Ukraine for its hostile

policy toward the Hungarian minority. Hungary claims that in this way it is protecting the Hungarian minority from bombardment of Transcarpathia by Russia. The autonomy of Transcarpathia has been postulated by Victor Orbán. Despite its multi-ethnicity, no political power in Transcarpathia for the time being is demanding secession. According to a November 2020 poll by the Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 0.6% of Transcarpathia's inhabitants were in favor of secession from Ukraine, and 2.8% were in favor of autonomy. (Potocki and Héjj 2020; Trojan 2022; Kaźmierczak 2022). Historian László Zubánics, leader of the Hungarian Democratic Party in Ukraine (UMDP), which cooperates with President Volodymyr Zelensky's Servant of the People party, believed that the Hungarians still present in Transcarpathia numbered less than 100,000. This was thought to be due to the policy of prime minister Viktor Orbán, who continued Hungary's long-standing policy of supporting the Hungarian minority in neighboring countries. Hungary grants them citizenship, facilitates emigration, and in the case of Transcarpathia, it is also a matter of avoiding conscription into the Ukrainian army for Ukrainian Hungarians (*Victor Orbán…* 2025). The Hungarian consul in Berehove (the capital of Transcarpathian Hungarians) distributed Hungarian passports among the Hungarian minority, leading to his expulsion from Ukraine and a diplomatic rift between Hungary and Ukraine (Malski and Zińko 2020, pp. 118–119; Jóźwiak and Szeligowski 2018; Potocki and Héjj 2023). The activities of a Hungarian agent network among the inhabitants of Transcarpathia are also heightening Ukrainian-Hungarian tensions (Gizińska, Sienicki 2025; Ion 2025), a process intently followed by Russia. Following Russian inspiration, two arson attacks on the Hungarian cultural center in Uzhhorod occurred in 2018 (*Kolejne…* 2018). Russia has conducted a propaganda campaign in Transcarpathia to separate it from Ukraine and has organised preparations for sabotage activities to destabilise the internal situation in the oblast (*Ukraińskie…* 2022; Mrowicki 2022).

In recent years the issue of language and identity rights of the inhabitants of the Transcarpathian Rus has been the subject of work by the Venice Commission – to which representatives of both Hungarians and Transcarpathian Rusyns have submitted specific proposals (Medvid 2023). An opinion issued by the Venice Commission regarding the Ukrainian law on national minorities highlighted a series of concerns. in particular regarding the restriction of the freedom to use minority languages (*Opinion…* 2023, pp. 22–23).

IV. Aspirations for Autonomy: the Chernivtsi Oblast

The oblast, with an area of 8,100 km² and a population of over 922,800, was created in 1940 from northern Bukovina, part of Bessarabia (including Khotyn) and the Hertsa region, comprised of territories of Romania annexed in 1940 by the USSR. The capital of the oblast is Chernivtsi (population 240,100). Its ethnic composition is as follows: Ukrainians 689,100 (75%), Romanians 114,600 (12.5%), Moldovans 67,200 (7.3%), Russians 37,900 (4.1%), and other ethnic groups 1.9%. In 1991, the independence of Ukraine was supported by 92% of the inhabitants of the oblast. In addition, a Moldovan minority also lives in the Odessa Oblast – almost 124,000 people, which accounts for 5% of its population. The Romanian authorities have not encouraged the Romanian minority to demand autonomy for the Chernivtsi region, because the Hungarian minority in Romania has made such demands in Transylvania (Rajczyk 2021, pp. 123–139; Puzyniak 2021, pp. 330–349). The Chernivtsi Oblast is one of the poorest regions of Ukraine. It is rich in scenic and tourism assets and has transport routes to the Balkans as well as significant mineral resources.

Markijan Malski and Igor Zińko from Lviv National University have emphasised that

> "national minorities, inhabiting primarily border areas in the so-called ethnic diffusion zone, are indigenous peoples: Romanians from Bukovina and Transcarpathia, Hungarians from Transcarpathia, Moldovans from Bessarabia and Bukovina, some Russians from the Luhansk region and Crimea, Poles from Galicia, etc. Some minorities cultivate the memory of the unlawful, forceful annexation to Ukraine, with the support of political forces, including foreign ones. Such sentiments are often fueled by the mass media in the historical homeland" (Malski and Zińko 2020, p. 119).

Naturally, historical and territorial issues in Romanian-Ukrainian relations have had an impact on bilateral relations. Romanian politicians and the Romanian minority claim that the state of the educational system and of the cultural life of ethnic Romanians is unsatisfactory. Nationalist political forces in Romania propagate the idea of a return to the so-called Greater Romania. Some Romanian minority organisation demand the combination of areas they inhabit in the Zakarpattia and Chernivtsi oblasts into an autonomous Romanian

region in Ukraine. Many Ukrainian Romanians have dual citizenship, something which is de facto barred by Ukrainian law (which forbids the voluntary acquisition of a foreign citizenship). As many as 50,000 inhabitants of the Chernivtsi Oblast may have such a dual citizenship (Malski and Zińko 2020, p. 122; Janiga 2022). Romanian and Moldovan minorities also inhabit Budjak, which historically was part of Moldova, and which in Ukraine is part of the Odessa Oblast.

Among the Romanian minority, an increase in nationalism and separatist aspirations began to appear after 2014, with fear of intensified Ukrainisation (Ștefan 2016). After demonstrations, representatives of the Romanian minority complained about increased surveillance by the Security Service of Ukraine (SSU; *Sluzhba Bezpeky Ukrayiny,* SBU). Despite protests from, among others, the National Council of Romanians in Ukraine (*Noi…* 2017), on 5 September 2017 the Verkhovna Rada passed a law reforming Ukrainian education, which restricted the teaching of minority languages in Ukrainian schools. The law reforming Ukrainian education places an emphasis on the teaching of the Ukrainian language at the cost of national minority languages. This was meant primarily to affect the Russian minority, but outside of Russia it has been most strongly criticised by Hungary and Romania (Sadecki, Piechal, and Dąbrowski 2017; Pogłódek 2020, pp. 5–19). The Romanian side has accused the Ukrainian authorities of underestimating the size of the Romanian minority and separating Romanian and Moldovan nationalities in Ukrainian statistics (which the Ukrainian authorities, however, stopped doing in 2023). Romania sees this as splitting the Romanian nation (Pieńkowski 2021; Malski and Zińko 2020, p. 106). Additionally, since 2002 there has been a dispute over Ukraine's economic activities in the Danube Delta (namely the dredging of waterways which alters the flow), which have had a negative impact on the natural environment in the Delta, something which is of great scenic and tourism value to Romania (Kastory 2022, pp. 239–252; Donaj 2013). Poland has attempted to prevent the Romanian-Ukrainian dispute from taking on the dimensions of the pro-Russian policies of Viktor Orbán. This is of particular importance in light of the destabilisation by Russia since the 1990s and the destabilisation of Ukraine in the context of the security of NATO's eastern flank as well as of the security of the states mentioned (Pieńkowski 2022). Despite this conflict, Romania and Ukraine share common geopolitical interests in terms of security vis-a-vis Russia (Całus 2022). Romania is interested in restoring the territorial integrity of Moldova and in its participation in the

European Union and NATO, as well as in the distant prospect of the re-unification of the two countries. For Ukraine, the pro-Russian Transnistria, in which Russian forces are stationed, is a threat to Ukraine's Black Sea coast (Tărîță 2021, pp. 350–367).

Conclusion

Contemporary Russia has benefited from a long tradition (Tsarist Russia, the USSR) of creating independent entities on its borders, which have then asked its authorities for incorporation. Russian bases in neighboring countries have often served as a preliminary stage on the road to Russian annexation. In its imperialist policy, Moscow has used its own interpretation of the right to self-determination, which precedes Russian annexation (separatism – irredentism – secession – incorporation). After the collapse of the USSR, Russia considered the independent states located in the post-Soviet zone as belonging to the Russian sphere of influence. It expected them to join the integration structures it had created or to remain neutral towards structures it considered hostile. In order to influence the domestic and foreign policy of the former Soviet republics, it exploits political, economic, and military means, as well as the Russian minority, the Russian-speaking population, and Orthodox religious identity (Stopka 2024). Among these populations, Russia stirs up separatist movements that lead to the breakup of states if their governments do not pursue policies in line with Russian interests. It supports separatist provinces in neighboring countries, citing, in the Russian understanding, the right to self-determination, the defense of the rights of the Russian population, the preservation of peace, human rights, the peaceful resolution of conflicts, and the fight against terrorism – in order to incorporate them, in whole or in part, into the borders of its empire. It advocates for their recognition by the international community (Abkhazia, South Ossetia). At the same time, it concludes integration agreements with them within the framework of Russian political, economic, and military structures, which ultimately lead to their incorporation, as in the case of Crimea (2014) or the south-eastern regions of Ukraine (2022) (see Kryukov 2025). Russia has denied countries affected by separatism, such as Azerbaijan, Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, the right to restore constitutional order by using force against separatists in accordance with their own domestic law. Russian armed forces

supporting separatists are called peacekeeping forces, and the partition of these states is called the right to self-determination. On the other hand, Russia considers all separatist movements within its territory to be illegal (inciting separatism is punishable by five years in prison) and labels their representatives terrorists (for example, Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Buryatia, Tatarstan), using force rather than political means against them. International criticism of the Russian authorities' use of excessive force in Chechnya (the First and Second Chechen Wars) was described by Russia as interference in its internal affairs (Przybyła 2011, pp. 149–153). It has also refused to allow representatives of the OSCE and the Council of Europe into conflict zones in Russia, and has exercised its veto power in the UN in conflicts to which it was a party. In all military operations in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Crimea, and Donbas, Russian troops have violated humanitarian laws against civilians and supported ethnic cleansing carried out by the authorities of these separatist provinces. Russia's actions towards these former Soviet states are a modern version of Russian imperialism, which Moscow previously pursued under Tsarist Russia and during the existence of the USSR. With its policy of fuelling separatism in Central and Eastern Europe, it has also undermined the European security system (in the face of the impotence of the Council of Europe and the OSCE regarding Russian policy) established after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR. The destabilisation of neighbouring countries serves Russia's interests in strengthening its position in the region (despite the negative repercussions of this policy on its international relations). Russia treats the Black Sea and Caucasus regions as areas essential to its economic and military security and as a route for expansion into the Balkans, the Mediterranean Basin, and the Middle East.

After Vladimir Putin's accession to power in 2000, Russia has evolved toward authoritarianism. The centralisation of political and economic power and the modernisation of the Russian armed forces were aimed at returning Russia to the international arena as a global power. Contemporary Russia continues the traditions of Tsarist Russia and the USSR in terms of destabilising neighbouring countries and waging a civilisational struggle against the West. It imposes high prices for energy resources on Central and Eastern European countries, closes its domestic market in violation of trade agreements, influences the election results of neighbouring countries, and finances networks of agents of influence, such as in the form of pro-Russian political parties and pro-Russian candidates in parliamentary and presidential

elections. It carries out similar activities aimed at destabilizing the European Union as a whole and its individual member states (separatisms in Western Europe) (see Ostrowski 2024; Jakubowski 2023; Deja 2020; Turecki 2020; *Partia…* 2019; *Rosyjska…* 2019; *Nowe…* 2019; Łomanowski 2016).

Since 1991, Russia has exploited internal ethnic, historical, cultural, economic, and religious problems (such as the conflict in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church over its dependence on the Moscow Patriarchate), as well as the lack of minority rights in Ukraine to inspire separatism among the Russian minority and Russian-speaking Ukrainian citizens in Crimea and south-eastern Ukraine. Separatist, autonomist, or regionalist aspirations in other regions of Ukraine, formerly belonging to neighbouring countries, did not pose a threat to its territorial integrity. In its propaganda, which reaches Ukraine, Russia proclaims the common historical, cultural, and religious ties between the peoples of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. It has idealised the community of states in the post-Soviet zone. It has financially supported the political, social, and national-cultural activities of political and economic elites in Russian-speaking regions who demand from the authorities in Kyiv territorial autonomy, federalisation of the state, the equality of Russian and Ukrainian as state languages, and the subordination of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church to the Moscow Patriarchate. In Russian electronic media, which have been freely available in Ukraine, Russia has opposed Ukraine's integration with Western structures such as the European Union and NATO as enemies of 'Orthodox civilisation' and Russia itself. It has called the national renewal of Ukraine a nationalism which threatens the existence of national minorities, or "Banderitism" and "fascism." After the pro-Western Orange Revolution (2004) and Revolution of Dignity (2013–2014), when Russia was losing control over Ukraine, it stirred up Russian irredentism in Ukrainian regions where Russian was the predominant language. The indecision of the West regarding the integration of post-Soviet states (apart from the former Baltic republics) was interpreted by Russia as tacit consent to informally recognise the post-Soviet zone as its exclusive sphere of influence.

After the outbreak of the Revolution of Dignity, Russia exploited Ukraine's internal crisis to carry out a series of special political, social, and military actions in Crimea and south-eastern Ukraine. It has financed, equipped, and directed armed groups in order to destabilise Ukraine. As a result of these actions, the Autonomous Republic of Crimea "declared independence" in order to "independently" become

part of Russia. In eastern Ukraine, the so-called "independent people's republics" (the DPR and LPR) initiated the creation of the so-called Novorossiya in order to separate the Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Mykolaiv, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Odessa regions from Ukraine. When pro-Russian separatists and Russian saboteurs failed to find support among the local population, Russia launched an invasion of Ukraine (the First Russo-Ukrainian War, 2014–2015). Russia has failed to persuade Poland, Slovakia, or Romania to make territorial claims against Ukraine. Only Hungary has fallen in line with that anti-Ukrainian policy. However, it should be emphasised here that the Rusyn, Crimean Tatar, Romanian, and Hungarian minorities have strived to preserve their national and cultural identity within the Ukrainian state. In contrast, the Russian (and Russian-speaking) minority allowed Russia to exploit them for actions aimed at dismantling the Ukrainian state. The demand for the federalisation of the Ukrainian state is a constant theme for Russia with regard to Ukraine. For this reason, the Ukrainian authorities have not agreed to abolish the unitary state system.

Without political, economic, and military consolidation of the post-Soviet zone, Russia has no chance of playing the role of a global power (as do the United States and China together with their allies), even in a multipolar system. The influence of Russia over the control of global resources (such as prices of oil and gas, the export of foodstuffs, arms trading) is steadily falling. With its resources and population, Ukraine is vital to Russia; without it, Russia can only be a regional power. Therefore, it decided to launch an attack on Ukraine in 2022 without hiding behind pro-Russian separatists in order to establish a pro-Russian government in Kyiv and/or annex the south-eastern regions in the Second Russo-Ukrainian War (*Saying…* 2025). Russian policy toward the post-Soviet zone also has deep ideological roots, stemming primarily from the old doctrine of the unity of the three East Slavic nations (Russia, Belarus, and "Little Russia," that is, Ukraine), which together form the great Russian nation. This doctrine (and its applications), which would require a very broad separate study to discuss, undoubtedly draws on numerous cultural, linguistic, religious, and political aspects of Eastern Europe, as well as social, national, and cultural events dating back to Imperial Russia and the USSR.

Moscow's approach to Ukraine and Belarus is mainly guided by geopolitics and its own interests. Such was the case under Tsarist Russia, when it shared its lands containing a Ukrainian population with the Austrian monarchy (as a result of the partitions of the Polish-

Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 18th century). After World War I, Soviet Russia destroyed the Belarusian People's Republic and the Ukrainian People's Republic. The Polish-Soviet border after 1945 was not an ethnic border. Russia has been doing the same since 1991, never supporting the Belarusisation of post-Soviet Belarus or the Ukrainisation of post-Soviet Ukraine, whose ability to exist independently is constantly undermined by President Putin and his entourage. The borders of Russia end wherever its expansion is halted.

Appendices
Modern Crimea:
History, Population, and Territory

After the annexation of the Crimean Khanate (in 1783), its lands became part of the Russian Novorossiysk Governorate, and then of the Taurida Oblast (1802–1921, Simferopol). Russia initiated a planned campaign of settlement. After the 1917 revolution, the Crimean Tatars established the Crimean People's Republic (1917–1919). After its defeat, the Bolsheviks and rebellious sailors of the Black Sea Fleet established the Taurida Soviet Socialist Republic (March–May 1918). After this was liquidated, the Germans permitted the formation of a Crimean Tatar government under Solomon Krym. In October 1918, Crimea was taken by the White Army of General Anton Denikin. Prime minister S. Krym demanded that the Supreme Council of the Paris Peace Conference (1919) entrust Poland with a mandate over the Crimean People's Republic. In April 1919, the Red Army abolished the government of the Crimean People's Republic, creating the Crimean Soviet Socialist Republic. In June 1919, Crimea was once again taken over by General Denikin's troops (from April 1920, General Pyotr Wrangel), which were defeated in November 1920 by the Red Army. In 1921, the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (1921–1946) became part of the Russian SFSR. In 1946, the Soviet authorities downgraded the Crimean ASSR to the level of the Crimean Oblast, which in 1954 was transferred to the Ukrainian SSR.

Population of Crimea: 1795: Crimean Tatars 87.6%, Russians 4.3%, Ukrainians 1.3%; 1917: Crimean Tatars 28.7%, Russians 41.2%, Ukrainians 8.6%; 1939: Crimean Tatars 19.4%, Russians 49.6%, Ukrainians 13.7%; 1989: Crimean Tatars 1.6%, Russians 67.1%, Ukrainians 25.8%; 2001: Crimean Tatars 12.1%, Russians 58.3%, Ukrainians 24.3%.

Crimean Oblast, area 26,080 km², population 1.97 million, capital Simferopol (336,200, Russians 66.7%, Ukrainians 21.3%, Crimean Tatars 7%), historical lands of the Crimean Khanate, ethnic composition (2001): Russians 1.18 million (58.32%), Ukrainians 492,200 (24.32%), Crimean Tatars 243,400 (12.03%), Belarusians 29,300 (1.45%), Tatars 11,100 (0.55%), Armenians 8,700 (0.43%), Jews 4,500 (0.22%), Poles 3,900 (0.2%), Moldovans 3,800 (0.2%), Azerbaijanis 3,700 (0.2%), and Greeks 2,800 (0.1%).

Sevastopol City Council, area 863,500 km², population 385,900, city of Sevastopol 344,800 (90.6% speak Russian, 6.8% speak Ukrainian), ethnic composition (2001): Russians (71.6%), Ukrainians (22.4%), Belarusians (1.6%), Tatars (0.7%), Crimean Tatars (0.5%), Armenians (0.3%), Moldovans (0.2%), Jews (0.3%), and Azerbaijanis (0.2%).

Donbas

In the years 1919–1924, eastern Donbas (until 1918 part of the historical Don Cossack Land, while the southern part of the Donetsk Oblast was part of the Shakhty Region) was part of the Ukrainian SSR. It was transferred to the Russian FSRS in the North Caucasus Region, in whose western districts nearly 40% of the Ukrainian population remained (in 1934, the Azov-Black Sea Krai was separated, and in 1937, the Rostov Oblast was separated). Part of Russia's Rostov Oblast is the Taganrog District (until 1918 part of the Don Cossack Land), which between 1918 and 1923 was part of the independent Ukrainian People's Republic, and later the Ukrainian SSR. In 1924, it was taken away from the Ukrainian SSR (Donetsk Oblast) and transferred to the North Caucasus Krai (since 1937, the Rostov Oblast). Until the outbreak of World War II most of its inhabitants were Ukrainians. The Ukrainian SSR had ethnic grievances against the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic and the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic. Moscow did not follow ethnic principles when changing borders during the Soviet era, but rather the interests of local elites ruling within the Soviet administration.

Novorossiya

Novorossiya or Novorossiyskaya Zemlya, colloquially New Russia and New Rus, is a historical region in south-eastern Ukraine, Moldova, the separatist para-state of Transnistria, and south-western Russia. The term Novorossiya was introduced in 18th-century Russia after the

wars with Turkey in the former Wild Fields located between the lower Dniester, the Black Sea, and the Sea of Azov, and the southern border of Little Russia and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth before 1793. Between 1764 and 1783 and 1796 and 1802, the Novorossiya Governorate existed in this area, which in 1802 was divided into the governorates of Yekaterinoslav, Kherson (1802–1803, Mykolaiv) and Taurida. In the years 1822–1874, together with the Bessarabian Governorate it formed part of the Novorossiysk-Bessarabian Governorate.

Regions of Ukraine Affected by Pro-Russian Separatism – Population and Area

Donetsk Oblast, area 26,500 km², population 4.34 million, capital Donetsk (950,000, Ukrainians 46.7%; Russians 48.2%), after the Russian occupation, the capital is Mariupol (458,500, Ukrainians 48.7%, Russians 44.4%), then Kramatorsk (162,800, Ukrainians 70.2%, Russians 26.9%), historical lands of Zaporizhzhia Sich, Sloboda Ukraine, and the Don Cossack Land, in a referendum on preserving the USSR (1991) 84.6% of the inhabitants voted in favor, in an independence referendum (1991) 83% voted in favor, ethnic composition (2001): Ukrainians 2.74 million (56.9%), Russians 1.84 million (38.2%), Greeks 77,500 (1.61%), Belarusians 44,500 (0.92%), Tatars 19,200 (0.4%), Armenians 15,700 (0.33%), Jews 8,800 (0.18%), Azerbaijanis 8,100 (0.17%), Georgians 7,200 (0.15%), Moldovans 7,200 (0.15%), Bulgarians 4,800 (0.1%), Germans 4,600 (0.1%), Poles 4,300 (0.09%), and Roma 4,100 (0.08%).

Luhansk Oblast, area 26.7 km², population 2.23 million, capital Luhansk (397,700, Ukrainians 49.6%, Russians 47%, Russian spoken by 85.3% of inhabitants), after Russian occupation, capital Severodonetsk (99,100, Ukrainians 59.0%, Russians 38.7%), historical lands of Sloboda Ukraine and the Don Cossack Land, in the independence referendum (1991) 83.86% in favor, ethnic composition (2001): Ukrainians 1.47 million (57.96%), Russians 991,800 (39.05%), Belarusians 20,600 (0.81%), Tatars 8,500 (0.34%), Armenians 6,600 (0.26%), Moldovans 3,300 (0.13%), Azerbaijanis 3,100 (0.12%), Jews 2,700 (0.1%), Roma 2,300 (0.09%), and Poles 2,100 (0.08%). Over 68.8% of the population considered themselves Russian-speaking, and 30.0% considered themselves Ukrainian-speaking.

Kharkiv Oblast, area 31,400 km², population 2.6 million, capital Kharkiv (1.42 million, Ukrainians 62.8%, Russians 33.2%, Russian

spoken by 65.9% of inhabitants), historical lands of Sloboda Ukraine and Zaporizhzhia Sich, ethnic composition (2001): Ukrainians 2.05 million (70.7%), Russians 742,000 (25.6%), Belarusians 14,700 (0.5%), Jews 11,500 (0.4%), Armenians 11,100 (0.4%), Azerbaijanis 5,600 (0.2%), Georgians 4,400 (0.15%), Tatars 4,200 (0.14%), Moldovans 2,500 (0.09%), and Vietnamese 2,400 (0.08%).

Kherson Oblast, area 28,460 km², population 1 million, capital Kherson (279,100, Ukrainians 76.6%, Russians 20%, 45.3% spoke Russian), independence referendum (1991) 90.13% in favor, ethnic composition (2001): Ukrainians 961,600 (82%), Russians 165,200 (14.09%), Belarusians 8,200 (0.7%), Tatars 5,300 (0.46%), Armenians 4,500 (0.39%), Moldovans 4,200 (0.36%), Turks 3,700 (0.32%), Crimean Tatars 2,100 (0.18%), Roma 1,800 (0.15%), and Jews 1,700 (0.15%).

Zaporizhzhia Oblast, area 27,180 km², population 1.67 million, capital Zaporizhzhia (710,000, Ukrainians 70.3%, Russians 25.4%, 56.8% spoke Russian), historical lands of the Zaporizhzhian Sich and the Crimean Khanate, independence referendum (1991) 90.66% in favor, ethnic composition (2001): Ukrainians 1.36 million (70.8%), Russians 476,700 (24.74%), Bulgarians 27,700 (1.44%), Belarusians 12,600 (0.66%), Armenians 6,400 (0.33%), Tatars 5,200 (0.27%), Jews 4,300 (0.23%), Georgians 3,900 (0.2%), Azerbaijanis 2,500 (0.13%), and Moldovans 2,470 (0.13%).

Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, area 31,900 km², population 3.14 million, capital Dnipropetrovsk (980,900, Ukrainians 72.6%, Russians 23.5%, 66% spoke Russian), historical lands of the Zaporizhzhian Sich, independence referendum (1991) 90.36% in favor, ethnic composition (2001): Ukrainians 2.82 million (79.3%), Russians 627,500 (17.6%), Belarusians 29,500 (0.8%), Jews 13,700 (0.4%), Armenians 10,600 (0.3%), Azerbaijanis 5,600 (0.2%), Moldovans 4,400 (0.12%), and Roma 4,100 (0.11%).

Mykolaiv Oblast, area 24,600 km², population 1.11 million, capital Mykolaiv (470,000, Ukrainians 72.6%, Russians 22.6%, 63% spoke Russian), historical lands of Yedysan, Zaporizhzhia, and Podolia, ethnic composition (2001): Ukrainians 1.03 million (81.91%), Russians 177,500 (14.06%), Moldovans 13,200 (1.04%), Belarusians 8,400 (0.66%), Bulgarians 5,600 (0.44%), Armenians 4,300 (0.34%), Jews 3,300 (0.26%), Koreans 1,700 (0.14%), Azerbaijanis 1,500 (0.12%), and Roma 1,500 (0.11%).

Odessa Oblast, area 33,300 km², population 2.27 million, capital Odessa (1.01 million, Ukrainians 61.6%, Russians 29%, 80%

spoke Russian), historical lands of Jedysan, Budjak, Podolia, and Poberezhzhia, independence referendum (1991) 85.38% in favor, ethnic composition (2001): Ukrainians 1.54 million (62.8%), Russians 508,500 (20.7%), Bulgarians 150,700 (6.1%), Moldovans 123,800 (5%), Gagauz 27,600 (1.1%), Jews 13,400 (0.6%), Belarusians 12,800 (0.5%), Armenians 7,400 (0.3%), Roma 4,000 (0.2%), Poles 3,200 (0.1%), Germans 2,900 (0.1%), Georgians 2,800 (0.1%), Azerbaijanis 2,800 (0.1%), and Tatars 2,600 (0.1%).

Oblasts and Territories of Ukraine with Aspirations for Autonomy – Population and Area

Zakarpattia Oblast: According to the Austro-Hungarian census of 1910, the population was almost 606,000, of which 330,000 (54.5%) spoke Rusyn, 185,400 (30.6%) spoke Hungarian (in the 1921 Czechoslovak census: 102,400 Hungarians, 80,000 Jews), 64,200 (10.6%) spoke German, 11,700 (1.9%) Romanian, 6,300 (1%) Slovak, and 8,200 (1.4%) other languages. According to the Soviet census (1989), out of a total population of 1.24 million: Ukrainians (including Rusyns) numbered 976,750 (78.4%), Hungarians 155,700 (12.5%), Russians 49,450 (4.0%), Romanians 29,480 (2.4%), Roma 12,450 (1%), Slovaks 7,300 (0.6%), and Germans 3,470 (0.3%).

Bukovina (Rom. Bucovina; Ukr. Буковина, Bukovina) a historical region in Central Europe located between the Eastern Carpathians and the middle Dniester River. Since 1940, it has been divided into Northern Bukovina (Ukraine) and Southern Bukovina (Romania). In former times, it belonged to the northern part of historical Moldova. A Polish minority lives in Bukovina on both sides of the border.

Hertsa (Rom. Ținutul Herta, Ukr. Край Герца, Krai Hertsa) a historical region in south-western Ukraine, near the border with Romania, part of historical Moldova. It covers the same area as the Hertsa region, and 93% of its inhabitants are Romanian.

Budjak, Ukrainian census from 2001: population 617,200, including 246,900 Ukrainians (40%), Bulgarians 129,000 (21%), Russians 124,500 (20%), and Romanians/Moldovans 78,300 (13%).

Persons Associated with Separatist Movements

Viktor Yanukovych, born in 1950, son of a Belarusian father and Russian mother, member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Ukrainian politician, professor of economics and law, prime

minister from 2002 to 2005 and from 2006 to 2007, chairman of the pro-Russian Party of Regions from 2003 to 2010, and president from 2010 to 2014. After being removed from power in February 2014, he fled to Rostov-on-Don (Russia). He planned to return to Ukraine with Russia's help, or to become president of a state created in the south-eastern regions of Ukraine, where the Party of Regions and the Russian minority dominated. In 2019, he was convicted in absentia by a court in Kyiv for treason for requesting military assistance from Russia against the opposition.

Mykola Azarov replaced Yanukovych as leader of the Party of Regions. He was deputy prime minister and minister of finance, then prime minister (2010–2014). Born in 1947 in Kaluga (Russia), Azarov, whose real name is Nikolai Yanovich Pakhlo, was a co-founder of the Party of Regions and its leader (2001–2002, 2010–2014). Although he was the son of a Russian mother and an Estonian father, Azarov considered himself Russian. In 1984, he settled in Ukraine, joined the CPSU, founded the pro-Russian Civic Congress of Ukraine in 1992, and was a member of the Verkhovna Rada (the Ukrainian parliament) from 1994. After being removed from power in 2014, Yanukovych and Azarov fled to Russia, where they attacked the new Ukrainian authorities and organised the pro-Russian Committee for the Salvation of Ukraine.

Prime minister of the DPR, **Alexander Borodai**, Russian Major General of the FSB (participated in the war in Transnistria, Deputy Director of the FSB since 2002), former political advisor to prime minister Sergey Aksyonov of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (27 February–17 March 2014).

Minister of defense of the DRL, colonel of the Spetsnaz GRU **Igor Girkin** (pseudonym Igor Strelkov, participation in the wars in Transnistria, Bosnia and Herzegovina (on the Serbian side), in both Chechen wars, and the annexation of Crimea).

Valery Bolotov, president of the LPR (May–August 2014), served in the Airborne Division in Vitebsk during the Soviet era, participated in the Nagorno-Karabakh War, and was chairman of the Airborne Forces Veterans Association in Luhansk.

Marat Bashirov, a Russian citizen and prime minister of the Luhansk People's Republic (July–August 2014), sat on the board of the Russian international news agency Interfax.

Igor Plotnitsky, minister of defense, then president of the LPR from 2014 to 2017, 1982–1991 career artillery officer in the Soviet Army. After removal from office, he left for Russia.

Leonid Pasechnik, Igor Plotnitsky's successor as president of the LPR, former minister of security of the LPR, former officer of the Ukrainian secret services, agent of the FSB FR.

Pavel Yuryevich Gubarev, born in 1983 in Severodonetsk, served as the self-proclaimed governor of the DPR from March to November 2014. He participated with the People's Militia of Donbas in the seizure of the regional government headquarters in Donetsk. He was removed from power and his position was abolished. He was a member of the paramilitary, racist, and nationalist Russian National Unity (RNU), operating in Russia and among the Russian minority in the post-Soviet zone, cooperating with the FSB. Members of the RNU participated in the aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. In Ukraine, Gubarev belonged to the pro-Russian Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine (1998–2022) led by Nataliya Vitrenko, who is associated with Aleksandr Dugin. Gubarev's wife, Ekaterina, serves in the Russian administration in the occupied territories of Ukraine. In 2023, Gubarev became the head of the Club of Angry Patriots, founded by Igor Strelkov (Girkin). Its goal is to annex Ukraine or part of it to Russia (Novorossiya).

Valery Vladimirovich Kaurov, born in 1956 in Odessa, politician and entrepreneur, considered himself an ethnic Russian, would-be leader of the Odessa People's Republic, liquidated in 2014 by the SSU. He was a member of the pro-Russian Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine, and then of the pro-Russian party "Russian Bloc" (1999 Russian Movement of Ukraine, since 2001 "For the Unity of Rus," in 2002 "For One Russia" merged with the Russian-Ukrainian Union into the "Russian Bloc"), which twice supported Viktor Yanukovych in the presidential elections and cooperated with the Party of Regions. The party was delegalised in Ukraine in 2014.

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