

THE EURASIA CENTER

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Eurasia Brief

Current Ukraine-Russian Relations



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Russian-Ukrainian Relations: Critical Issues & Development Paths

A year ago, actor Vladimir Zelensky became President of Ukraine. Before he became President of Ukraine, he received a degree in law and created a production company that produces films and TV comedy shows. Based on the latest election in Ukraine, we can clearly see that Ukrainian people want to be with the European countries in the future, but they have some difficulties that are stopping them to get in the EU right now. The biggest problems that we can identify in Ukraine are corruption and regional rifts.

Zelensky managed to maintain Russian gas transit through the Ukrainian GTS. The parties negotiated for a long time, but at the end of 2019, Gazprom nevertheless signed a new five-year agreement with Naftogaz. The Russian company had to agree to a two percent increase in transportation costs. As a result, the total amount under the contract may exceed seven billion dollars. The President managed to maintain financial stability in the country, Ukraine's dollar, the hryvnia, retained its stability. Freedom of speech is operating in Ukraine better than it used to be, under Zelensky it became much freer than under the last Administration.¹

There was a paradoxical effect with Zelensky in Ukraine when the President combines two images. On the one hand, it is a television experienced actor who talks about the good things he does, how he takes care of everything, and so on. Another image is that he is the country's leader who is responsible for everything that happens in it. Both images project the prevailing opinion that Ukraine should be independent and friendly - with open borders, without visas and customs.

The attitude between Russia and Ukraine has been changing since the dissolution of the USSR. Russian actions in Crimea and the Donbass in 2014 caused a sharp drop in the number of Ukrainians who had a positive attitude toward Russia. The problems between Russia and Ukraine will take many years to resolve. Ukrainian attitudes toward Russia are slowly improving. The decline in a positive attitude of Ukrainians toward Russia was observed after the take-over of Crimea and military actions that started in the Donbass in the eastern part of Ukraine, but after the

¹ Ukrinform. "Volodymyr Zelensky in Power: What Has Been Done in the Past Year?" *Ukrinform*, Укринформ, 21 Apr. 2020, www.ukrinform.net/rubric-politics/3009545-volodymyr-zelensky-what-has-been-done-in-the-past-year.html.

end of the relentless military actions, the attitude of the Ukrainians to Russia began to improve again after a long time. On the graph below, you can see the statistics from both sides of those countries. ²

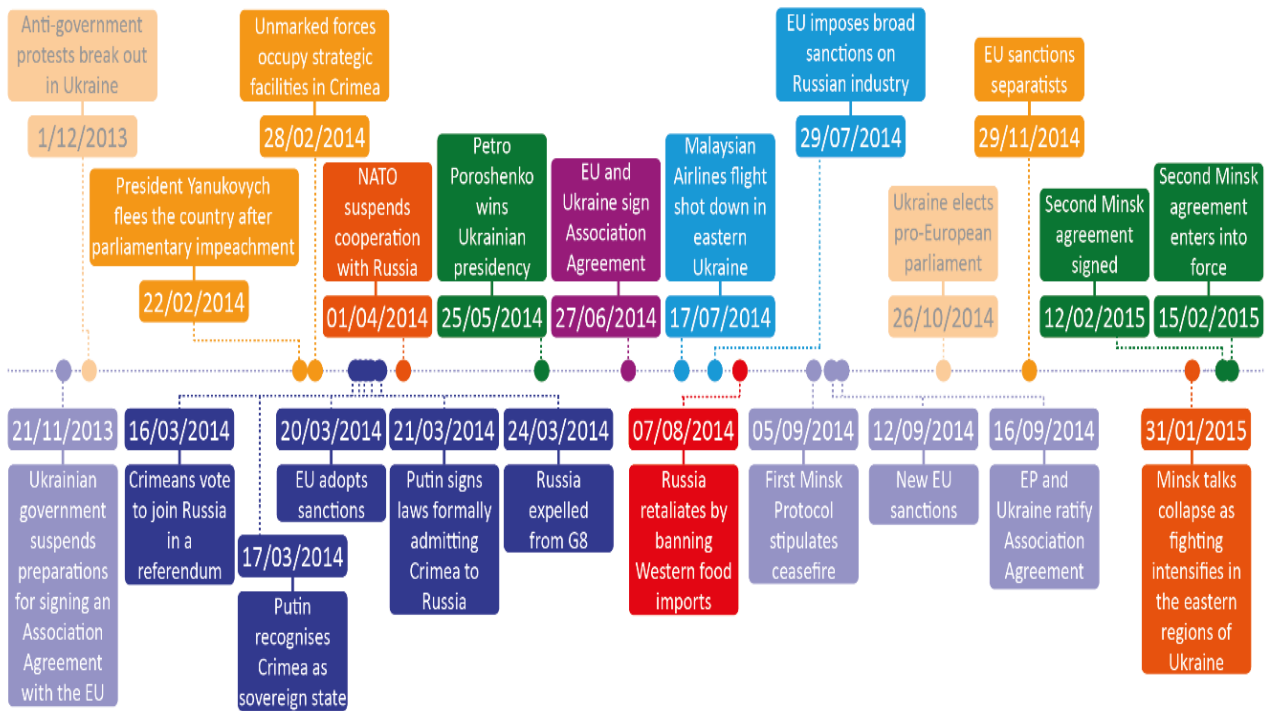


Crimea. The Crimean Peninsula, north of the Black Sea in Europe, was annexed by the Russian Federation in 2014. There were several factors why Russians took back the Crimea. First, the Crimean operation was a response to the threat of further NATO expansion along the western borders of Russia. Putin went on to capture the peninsula in an effort to prevent one of two scenarios detrimental to Russia: first, the likelihood of Ukraine joining NATO, and/or secondly, the possibility of Kiev’s eviction of the Black Sea Fleet from its old base in the port of Sevastopol. The annexation of Crimea may be a part of a Russian project to gradually return to itself former territories of the Soviet Union. For Russia, it would mean a reversal of the loss of prestige after the Cold War. Putin is trying to take back step-by-step some of past territory of the former Soviet

² Paniotto, Volodymyr. *Press Releases and Reports - Attitude of the Population of Ukraine toward Russia and of the Population of Russia toward Ukraine, February 2019*, 2019, www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=831&page=2.

Union. Lastly, the opportunity came for Russia to absorb Crimea once again since it is one of Russia's most important ports.³ On the picture below, you can look at timeline of this conflict.⁴

Timeline, November 2013 – February 2015



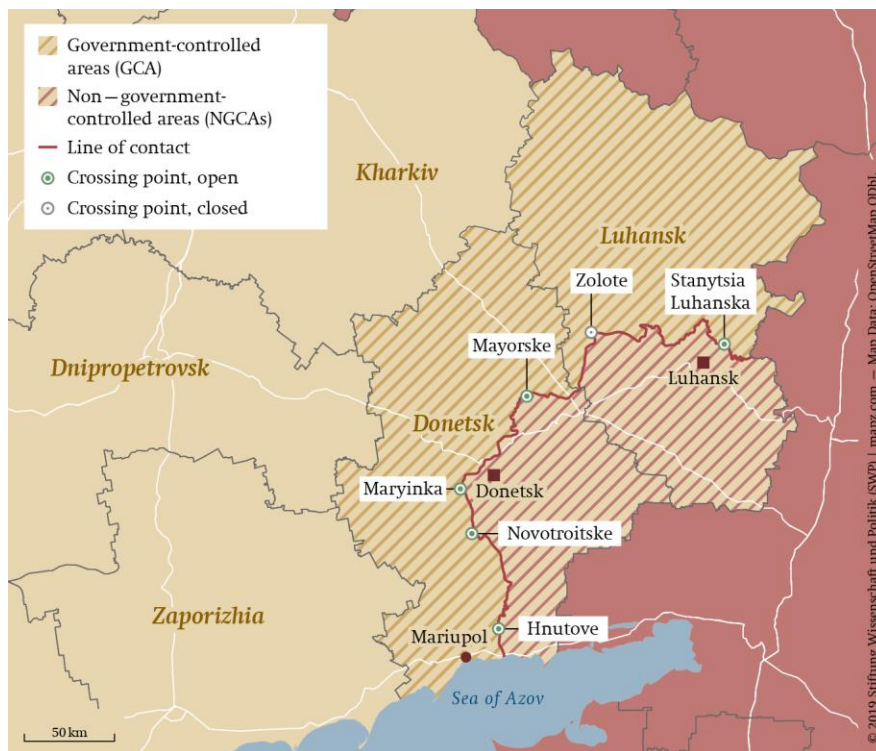
President of Ukraine Vladimir Zelensky advocates an increase in the number of conferences on which the issue of the de-occupation of Crimea will be discussed, including at the international

³ Fisher, Max. "Everything You Need to Know about the Ukraine Crisis." *Vox*, Vox, 3 Sept. 2014, www.vox.com/2014/9/3/18088560/ukraine-everything-you-need-to-know.

⁴ "Ukraine Crisis: Timeline, November 2013 – February 2015." *European Parliamentary Research Service Blog*, 13 Feb. 2015, epthinktank.eu/2015/02/13/minsk-peace-agreement-still-to-be-consolidated-on-the-ground/eprs-briefing-548991-minsk-peace-summit-fig1-timeline/.

level. The President emphasized that the return of the Crimean Peninsula under the Ukrainian flag is one of the conditions for lifting sanctions from Russia.⁵

Donetsk. On May 26, 2014, full-scale hostilities in eastern Ukraine began with fighting at the Donetsk airport. The Ukrainian army opposed the separatists of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics, which enjoyed unofficial support from Russia. The active stage of aggressions continued until February 2015 at which point the second Minsk Agreement was signed. Therefore, in early April 2014, Ukraine finally lost control of the scale of violence in two regional centers of Donbass as Russia unofficially supported separate movements in each region. The refusal to use force was later explained by general disorientation in the first weeks after Ukraine lost the Crimea and fears of bloodshed. Therefore, part of the Donbass turned not only into two new “hot spots” but also a ticking time bomb for Ukraine. The war became a daily occurrence, as did the information and financial blockade, a freeze in access to the region, and shelling of settlements on both sides. Below, you can look at the map of the conflict region.⁶



⁵ French Press Agency. “Ukraine's Zelensky Declares Annual Day against Russia's Crimea Annexation.” *Daily Sabah*, Daily Sabah, 26 Feb. 2020, www.dailysabah.com/world/ukraines-zelensky-declares-annual-day-against-russias-crimea-annexation/news.

⁶ “The Donbas Conflict.” *SWP*, www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2019RP05/.

During the presidency of Vladimir Zelensky, significant successes in resolving the conflict in the Donbass has not been achieved. Earlier, Ukraine “categorically” rejected the idea of securing the special status of Donbass in the Constitution, but at the same time took the initiative to transfer control over the border with Russia to Kiev. According to experts, the Ukrainian authorities are dragging on time, portraying their commitment to the Minsk agreements. Such tactics only drag out the conflict, and without external influence on Kiev from the West, there are few hopes for its resolution analysts have determined. In April 2020, Kiev again rejected the idea of securing the special status of Donbass in the Constitution during the next meeting of the Trilateral Contact Group (TAG) to resolve the situation in southeastern Ukraine. Earlier, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky said that he could end the conflict in the Donbass before the end of his first presidential term, which lasts until 2024. In particular, the Ukrainian side insists on transferring control over the border with Russia to it even before the elections in Donbass and the adoption of a new Constitution in Ukraine.⁷ The Minsk agreements do indeed include the possibility of Ukraine regaining control of the border with Russia, but this can only happen after the elections in the unrecognized republics. America can push Kiev towards a peaceful resolution to the conflict, which has a great influence on the Ukrainian authorities, experts say.

⁷ Creator. “By Name ‘Donetsk’ Found 57 Results.” *Official Website of the President of Ukraine*, www.president.gov.ua/en/search?query=donetsk&_token=60ieWOs9Id8Toue5FFgFRom26gBbHvL6f4JKbNZa&date-from=11-06-2019&date-to=11-06-2020&page=1.



The NATO expansion. One of the last significant steps in the way of Ukraine's rapprochement with NATO's neighboring countries was the creation in 2016 of the Ukrainian-Polish-Lithuanian brigade, where the soldiers of the three countries "jointly implement the standards for the functioning of the Alliance's troops." This project is designed to combine the Eastern European countries of NATO (Poland and the Baltic countries) located between the Baltic and Black Seas with the countries of the "gray zone" of security (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia) and help the latter "integrate into the international security structure".

Therefore, despite many difficulties, Ukraine can gradually implement the Euro-Atlantic agenda. Success will largely depend on the political will of Kiev itself. First, Ukraine needs to demonstrate the invariability of the course for membership in the NATO Alliance from election to election, regardless of the change of political elites. This will be decisive, although it will not remove from its agenda the problems associated with reform in the armed forces of Ukraine or the country as a whole.



NATO has broken its historic promise by gradually approaching Russian borders. In March 2017, the North Atlantic Alliance granted Ukraine the status of a "post-graduate country," which means an invitation to join an accelerated dialogue with NATO on membership issues. Russia maintains a negative attitude towards the expansion of NATO, in particular to plans for admission to the alliance of Ukraine, as well as to bringing NATO's military infrastructure closer to Russian borders in general, which violates the principle of equal security, leading to the emergence of new dividing lines in Europe and is contrary to the objectives of increasing the effectiveness of working together to find answers to the real challenges of our time. The presence of Ukraine in NATO would deprive Russia the opportunity to conduct military operations against Ukraine.

NATO recognises Ukraine as Enhanced Opportunities Partner

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On Friday (12 June 2020), the North Atlantic Council recognised Ukraine as an Enhanced Opportunities Partner. This status is part of NATO's Partnership Interoperability Initiative, which aims to maintain and deepen cooperation between Allies and partners that have made significant contributions to NATO-led operations and missions.



Sanctions towards Russia. All the direct sanctions against Russia were directed to all Russian citizens, transport vessels including ships and aircraft, being banned from carrying out any kind of business activity and stopped from stepping into the United States territory. All the sanctions had their nature of being good or bad. Starting from the first cause of sanctions - the implication was Russia attacked Ukraine.⁸ First, even before the imposing of the sanction, it was not right for Russia to invade the territory of Ukraine because it was logical that America was going to use this chance to somehow punish Russia and attempt to take entire control of this situation. If they had their reasons, they should have solved them peacefully with the government of Ukraine, without making

⁸ Marten, K., Putin's Choices: Explaining Russian Foreign Policy and Intervention in Ukraine. The Washington Quarterly. Volume 38, pp. 189-204. 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2015.1064717>

it a big scandal. The Russian army, under the permission of their President, attacked the eastern part of Ukraine's lands and its region of Crimea in 2014.⁹ This began Russia's new move to aggrandize power within Eurasia, especially Europe.

The sanctions rebuked the officials of the Russian government and the people in charge the Russian Defense industry. Apart from that, the sanctions affected significant areas of the economy of Russia and those that operated from Crimea. The penalties were suited to the desires of Ukraine as they were the victims in this case. They made sure that there was some peace and security at the borders of Ukraine from Russian attacks. On the other hand, it would be difficult to make the Russians sue for peace with Ukraine solely by enacting sanctions. The impact they got from attacking Ukraine was quite harmful as they found it to be hard to attack and secure territory during the expansion within the Donbass.

Development in Relations. Zelensky promised to continue reforms, accelerate the fight against corruption, deepen Ukraine's European integration and bring peace to the Donbass. According to the statement of the Zelensky team, they believe that Vladimir Putin really wants to normalize relations with the unrecognized republics of the LPR and the DPR, which implies specific actions aimed at negotiations with the Russian Federation. Moreover, Zelensky's inability to improve relations with Russia in fact does not at all depend on who is in power in Moscow but is connected exclusively with the peculiarities of Russian nationalism. Representatives of the Russian state and a significant part of Russian society are convinced that Ukraine is an "artificial" and "insolvent" state and deny the existence of a separate Ukrainian people. President Putin and other Russian leaders have repeatedly stated that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people," and dismissively

⁹ Jonsson, O., and Seely, R., Russian Full-Spectrum Conflict: An Appraisal After Ukraine. *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*. Volume 28, Pp. 1-22. 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2015.998118>

called the Ukrainian language a dialect. Russia does not consider Ukraine a sovereign or independent state with permanent borders.¹⁰

In conclusion, division between Russia and Ukraine is beneficial to those who fear that they will unite and become a global competitor to Europe and the world. The interaction of Moscow and Kiev is disadvantageous to a number of countries. It is not worth denying the role of external influence on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, but it is impossible to exaggerate its significance, experts say. Russia and Ukraine's frozen conflict remains, as do sanctions that all Russians do not like so much were imposed on Russia as a result of this conflict.¹¹ It is time for new approaches to help resolve this the Gordian Knot of Ukrainian-Russian relations.

¹⁰ Ukraine conflict: Putin 'was ready for nuclear alert'. (2015, March 15). Retrieved July 01, 2020, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31899680>

¹¹ Putin forever: Ukraine faces the prospect of endless imperial aggression. (2020, February 13). Retrieved July 01, 2020, from <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putin-forever-ukraine-faces-the-prospect-of-endless-imperial-aggression/>



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