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# Crisis in Ukraine and the rise of Russia in the post-Soviet era: a geopolitical look at Moscow

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## Summary

This article analyzes the crisis in Ukraine, after the events of 2013 and 2014, which generated changes in Ukrainian politics, particularly due to the projection of Russia in an area that par excellence awakens the rebirth of Moscow. Starting from this scenario, it is shown how the current conflict in Ukraine, generated by a revival of Russia in the post-Soviet era, translates as the ultimate goal of the Kremlin to contain any initiative that Kiev intends to carry out with the European Union and with the United States, Moscow's main rivals.

Intertwining the causes of the crisis in Ukraine, in parallel with the political leadership under the presidency of Vladimir Putin, is transcendental to understand the dynamics of one of the most important conflicts that the Kremlin has had to face in the post-Soviet era.

## Key words

United States, Geopolitics, Kremlin, NATO, Russia, Ukraine, European Union.

## Introduction

The disappearance of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991 and Russia's appetite to continue to gain influence on its Eastern European borders are the main motivations for the Kremlin to draw the natural lines of what - in geopolitical terms - it intends. Perform. The rebirth of Russia as a power marks a milestone in the post-Soviet era to position itself in the international relations of the 21st century. The wounds left in the political order, after the disintegration of the USSR, made the rethinking and redesign of a strategy of the antidote in order to obtain a leading role in global affairs, making Ukraine an actor to measure Russia's counterweights with the West. However, the

Ukrainian conflict has also been influenced by internal causes such as the dissemination of the Nation-State, which does not allow cohesion in its territorial integrity or full self-determination.

Meanwhile, the Ukrainian intention to materialize a Free Trade Agreement with the European Union in 2013, in defiance of Russian influence, provoked a conflict of great consequences in the Kremlin and in a sector of the Ukrainian population. Situation that is aggravated by Kiev's desire to be part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

### **Analysis**

*"Above the city is the Kremlin, above the Kremlin there is only God"* says a Moscow proverb. Starting from this premise, it can be deduced how one of the most powerful empires in the world overwhelmed a hundred ethnic groups. For several centuries, Russian politics has followed its own special rhythm, which has allowed it to have a large territorial extension. Circumstances have changed from Peter the Great to Vladimir Putin, but the pace has remained remarkably constant. (1)

After the disappearance of the USSR, the Russian Federation was marked by great changes that tried to leave the Cold War behind; however, the Russian influence did not completely disappear. With the rise of Vladimir Putin, moving from Prime Minister and President of the Federation from 2000 to the present, emphasis was placed on the Russian interest in recovering spaces that were its own in its nearby borders and becoming, once again, an important global actor. In this sense, leaving geopolitical projection behind is not exactly one of Putin's objectives. For this reason, what happened in Ukraine is part of the Russian aspirations on its Eastern European borders. On the other hand, the ethnic-cultural aspect shows an important historical relationship between Ukraine and Russia, facilitating the understanding of the current Ukrainian crisis and -in turn- showing the origins that the Russian and Ukrainian populations have in common, since they are considered the "Rus" as the historical population from which the Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians come (2) and even the one that gave Russia its name. (3)

Instead of liberalizing Russia and expanding its soft power throughout the former USSR, as well as the adjacent Eurasia region, Putin has opted for neo-tsarist expansionism. However, Ukraine is the pivotal state that itself transforms Russia. (4) The very independence of Ukraine keeps Russia largely out of Europe. With Greek and Roman Catholics in Western Ukraine and Eastern Orthodox in the East, Western Ukraine is a breeding ground for Ukrainian nationalism, while the East favors closer relations with Russia. (5) Thus, the process of shaping Ukraine as a Nation-State does not succeed in being fully realized, generating very significant internal conflicts.

During the last centuries, Russia has been an indisputable factor in the history and geography of Ukraine. Paradoxically, none of these countries has long experience as a nation-state, though for different reasons. In the case of Russia, the empire has constantly repressed the Nation, while, in the case of Ukraine, the Nation and the State have never coincided. Following the logic of post-Soviet nation-state building, the new

Russian elites turned to the pre-communist era and began to rebuild the "Russia they had lost;" that is, the Russian Empire in the traditional packaging of a "single and indivisible" orthodox politics. For Putin, the disintegration of the USSR was the greatest tragedy of the 20th century, which could and should have been avoided. (6) Among the different elements that are part of the dynamics of the Ukrainian conflict, it is important to highlight the emergence of Russia under the leadership of Putin, giving a nationalist value to Moscow's positions to conquer spaces that were its own in the Soviet era.

The way in which Russia wishes to repel any European intention to influence Russian surrounding areas draws attention. In 2013, the decision of former Ukrainian President Víktor Yanukovych, an ally of Russia, not to sign a Free Trade Agreement with the European Union generated massive protests, initiating one of the most intense conflicts that Russia has had to face in the XXI century and that –at the same time- has helped it to conquer important neighboring territories. In this sense, the lack of consensus and cohesion among the Ukrainian population, divided into pro-Russian and Ukrainian nationalists, generates a crisis that works in favor of Russian interests in the area.

Additionally, in 2014, pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine called a referendum to declare the independence of Donetsk and Lugansk; however, these results have not been recognized by Ukraine, the European Union, or the West. Indeed, the issue raised by the Ukrainian crisis is the containment of the liberal expansion from the West to the East, with the European Union persisting in its efforts. These efforts will continue to find shelter in the most pro-European part of Ukraine (Kiev and the industrial zone), but not in the pro-Russian rebel zone of Donetsk and Lugansk, much less in Crimea whose secession and annexation by Russia seems a fait accompli. (7)

Historically, Crimea has been shown to have played a very important role for Russia due to its geographical and strategic position. The Crimean peninsula has a large gas reserve north of the Black Sea, becoming - in 1850 - the epicenter through which the Russians fought the French, British and Ottomans. Later, 100 years later, the former USSR declared it part of Ukraine; However, Russia currently classifies this decision as illegitimate, considering that more than 50% of the population of Crimea are Russian descendants.

For Russia, Ukraine constitutes a buffer state over part of which it has direct influence. In doing so, Russia prevents immediate neighborhood with Western states. Likewise, Russia consolidates its desire to form a Customs Union with Belarus, Kazakhstan and, at least, with part of Ukraine. On that basis, the Commonwealth of Independent States will be strengthened, reversing part of what, in President Putin's opinion, was the "worst geopolitical catastrophe" of the 20th century (the implosion of the USSR). (8)

Meanwhile, NATO is a highly relevant actor in the Ukrainian crisis, Kiev requesting its protection when it feels threatened by Russia. This American-European transatlantic alliance of collective security, created in 1949 to remove Europe from the sphere of influence of the USSR, continues in force and has been reinforced due to the differences that the West has had with Moscow on the role that Russia has played in the crisis in Ukraine. However, the cards do not play in Kiev's favor when it comes to Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky's wish for Ukraine to become a NATO member state,

attempting to tie its national security to European continental security. Russia has emphatically rejected this wish, albeit with little echo in Washington and most European capitals, as Russian military pawn movements throughout Eastern Europe pose a strategic situation very similar to the historic Euromissile battle. during the 80s of the last century, where the former USSR and, now, Russia adopt the same military position, accumulating men and weapons on their borders with Europe. Faced with this scenario, the Atlantic Alliance responds, today as yesterday, by taking tactical positions on the same borders. (9) However, it is convenient for Russia that instability persists in Ukraine, since a country with these characteristics cannot be a member of NATO.

The way European leaders, particularly the French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, perceive the problem in Ukraine (versus their own interests) has not generated pro-Kiev diplomacy for Ukraine to join NATO. No less important is Germany's dependence on Russian gas, through Nord Stream 2 (work to be completed soon), which is why Berlin does not risk making such a daring decision in favor of Ukraine. What has become quite clear regarding Russian tactics is that concessions in favor of Russia will not solve any problems but will only show the weakness of the West and encourage further action in its "immediate" neighborhood. The Kremlin only understands the language of force and concrete actions to achieve a favorable development of the situation. While Ukrainians have good reason to be alarmed at the prospect of a broader war, they have also learned their lesson during the six-year conflict with Russia. Therefore, they are under no illusions about the support of their allies, as they know that it is up to the Ukrainians to protect their sovereignty and they are determined to do so, as they did in 2014; however, they are now much better prepared and equipped for it. (10)

For most Russians, Ukraine continues to be -de facto- a "Little Russia"; that is, a part of the Russian Orthodox Nation, together with "Greater Russia" and "White Russia" (Belarus). The large cities of Ukraine maintain part of Soviet history, with countless monuments to the victims of Chernobyl, to fallen soldiers or veterans in the Afghan-Soviet war, as well as to deceased cosmonauts, firefighters, policemen, actors, and literary characters. Undoubtedly, the Soviet heritage lives on in today's independent Ukraine. (11) Therefore, the Soviet legacy and the lack of convergence as a Nation-State creates great challenges for Ukraine both in its domestic and foreign policy due to its rapprochement with the West.

Seven years have passed since the illegal annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and the start of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, which -according to UN data- has resulted in the loss of more than 14,000 lives and left - approximately 3.4 million people in need of humanitarian aid, assistance, and protection services. The Minsk Agreements, signed between 2014 and 2015, which were supposed to introduce an immediate and complete ceasefire, have only led to the gradual disappearance of coverage of the conflict in the international media. So far this year alone (until April 16, 2021), 30 Ukrainian military personnel have been killed as a result of this latent conflict. (12)

The European Command of the United States of America has raised its level of vigilance for Ukraine to the highest; that is to say, a possible imminent crisis. The Ukrainian leadership has been actively involved in discussions with its Western partners, including

US President Joe Biden, regarding these developments and the possibility of further escalation. (13) On the other hand, his predecessor, former President Donald Trump, although during his presidential campaign (in 2016) he expressed that the Crimean peninsula was more identified with Russia, upon reaching the White House he maintained his country's position against this conflict, deepening the gap between Washington and Moscow. Today, the United States is among Ukraine's key foreign partners and one of its main providers of political, economic, and military aid. Since Russia's aggression in 2014, the North American country has been a firm supporter, both in word and deed, of the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security of Ukraine, as well as the implementation of democratic reforms, committing itself with the defense of Ukraine. Additionally, the United States has pressed for firm support to consolidate international opposition to Russia's annexation of Crimea, and military intervention in Donbas, considering that President Biden knows Ukraine better than any of his predecessors in the Oval Bureau (14)

Biden has already singled out Russia as "the greatest threat" to the United States. Unlike Trump, Biden does not share any sympathy for Vladimir Putin, so he has no illusions of any change in Russia's behavior, clearly understanding the challenges posed by Russian activities in the region. Therefore, Biden is expected to maintain and even increase military support for Ukraine. Through sanctions on Russia, the United States could seek to further deter Russian behavior in Ukraine and in the general region. (15) In addition, Biden is known for his track record of promoting the United States' role in Eastern Europe and for his outspoken support for NATO enlargement. However, regarding Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO, the current US president's position is likely to remain in line with the previous Obama administration, which was characterized by caution and restraint. (16)

The United States' efforts to intervene diplomatically in the Ukrainian crisis make its relationship with Russia one of confrontation. On one side, the European Union, not having a defined strategy with regard to Ukraine, does not show a full solution to the conflict, a space that is used by Moscow to gain time in its favor. On the other hand, what the West wants is to cut off China's intentions in its Silk Road project. In this regard, Beijing has already envisioned Ukraine as a transit point, maintaining and intensifying its alliance with Moscow. Meanwhile, Russia's projections in the post-Soviet era prevent Ukrainians from consolidating a feat for the integrity of a country that is capable of forming a sense of belonging and sovereignty.

The current crisis is, of course, rooted in the disintegration of the USSR. The emergence of fifteen new states produced a significant change in the global scenario, not only because of the ideological vacuum that occurred due to the dissolution of the great communist project, but also because of the identity dilemmas that some states have had during the post-Cold War. The case of Ukraine is probably one of the most representative due to its political nature, close to the Russian tradition and influence, and to the tension generated within the country, where the historical fragmentation between East and West has brought countless consequences of a territorial, ethnic, cultural, or geopolitical order, as well as in the configuration of national identity, repercussions that have been woven together in the post-communist period. (17)

## **Conclusions**

Beyond the ethnic and historical connections with Russia, Moscow's geopolitical pretensions generate great challenges for Ukraine, as Russia seeks to assert itself in its nearby geography and -in this way- establish itself in its former area of influence. The conquest of geopolitical spaces by Russia makes it a global actor capable of generating a counterweight to its main rivals in the post-Soviet era, where Ukraine constitutes the link to measure the forces between the West and Moscow.

Ukraine is clearly the result of the influence of various socio-political issues that have shaped its position today. The division between the populations of the East and the West is due to a historical root that has always put the great powers that surround this region in dispute. The confluence of two worldviews in the same territory has generated great problems. Indeed, the regions of the East that are Russophile have always come into tension with the inhabitants of the West who recognize themselves as closer to Europe and its customs, generating the absence of cohesion around a common project of the Nation. (18)

Elucidating scenarios in the crisis in Ukraine, in the face of a revival of a Russia in the post-Soviet era, leads to the elaboration of a multi-cause scheme around the political situation. The projection of the United States in European affairs, together with NATO, allows it to push Putin's Russia out of Europe, trying to obstruct any strategy that Moscow intends to carry out in Ukraine. Under these parameters, the leaders deduce the expansion of forces in order to cope with a conflict that has remained constant in the last seven years. While Biden is committed to a pragmatism that allows balancing Europe's vulnerability to Russia and Euro-Asia, Putin defies any intention of Washington in a space in which - historically - Moscow has maintained a presence for centuries, not only culturally, but also in its origins as a State.

## **Final Notes**

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