

THE UKRAINIAN STATE UNDER PRESSURE: A CLASH OF INTERESTS BETWEEN THE WEST AND RUSSIA

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Abstract: This paper examines Ukraine's geopolitical situation and its struggle for sovereignty in the context of the conflict between the West and Russia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine faced serious political, economic, and security challenges, culminating in several significant events: the Orange Revolution (2004), the Maidan protests (2013–2014), the annexation of Crimea (2014), the conflict in Donbas, and the Russian invasion (special military operation) in 2022.

The research employs historical analysis, the comparative method, and geopolitical theory to assess the role of external factors in the Ukrainian crisis. Western powers, particularly the United States and the European Union, have provided Ukraine with political, economic, and military support, while Russia has sought to maintain its influence through military intervention, diplomatic pressure, and interference in internal affairs. Furthermore, the economic dimension of the conflict is examined, including Ukraine's efforts to negotiate an agreement on the extraction of critical minerals with the United States, which has increased its strategic significance in international politics. The role of energy resources, trade dependencies, and economic sanctions is also considered in shaping the broader geopolitical landscape.

Ultimately, Ukraine's fight for independence has far-reaching implications for global stability, European integration, and international law, influencing the balance of power in the region. Its outcome will be crucial for the future of European security architecture and the stability of post-Cold War international relations.

Keywords: Russo-Ukrainian conflict, West, geopolitics, invasion, sanctions.

Introduction

The history of Ukraine represents a fundamental narrative of the struggle for national independence and cultural identity, marked by exceptionally difficult periods throughout the centuries. Its roots trace back to Kievan Rus', a medieval state that existed from the 9th to the 13th century and is considered a predecessor of the Russian and Ukrainian nation. Later, Ukraine's territory became part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and subsequently

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came under the control of the Russian Empire and Austro-Hungary. During the Soviet period, Ukraine was one of the most significant republics within the USSR, but at the same time suffered from mass repressions, including the Holodomor, the great famine of 1932–33, which left deep scars on Ukrainian society.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine emerged as an independent state but faced political, economic, and security challenges. Ukraine's geopolitical position placed it at the center of the competing interests of the West and Russia, resulting in a series of crises and conflicts, particularly after 2004.

This paper focuses on the key historical events that have shaped the modern Ukrainian state, including the Orange Revolution, the Maidan protests, the annexation of Crimea, the conflict in Donbas, and the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022. The research applies historical and political analysis to illustrate the complexity of the relations between Ukraine, the West, and Russia.

The main research question posed in this paper is: How have historical and political processes in Ukraine influenced its contemporary geopolitical position and its relations with the West and Russia? Sub-research questions include: Has Western support assisted Ukraine's stability or deepened divisions within Ukrainian society? and How has Russian foreign policy utilized Ukraine as an instrument for geopolitical control?

This study employs a qualitative analysis based on historical sources, political documents, and academic publications. The analysis is grounded in the following theoretical approaches:

- Geopolitical realism – explaining the struggle for power among states within the context of global politics;

- Comparative analysis – comparing different democratic revolutions in Ukraine and their impact on the stability of the state.

In addition, the paper applies discourse analysis to examine how Russian and Western rhetoric has shaped the narrative surrounding Ukrainian events. This includes analyzing official government statements, political speeches, and media reports to uncover hidden strategies of political influence.

The research also adopts a multidisciplinary approach, combining geopolitical, historical, and sociological perspectives, aiming to achieve a deeper understanding of the internal and external factors shaping the Ukrainian crisis.

The Orange Revolution

The Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004) is considered a significant moment in the country's modern history. It emerged as a response to widespread electoral irregularities during the presidential elections between candidates Viktor Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovych. In the first round of voting, Yanukovych received support from the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, while Yushchenko was the favorite in the western and central parts. However, the second round of elections was accompanied by numerous allegations of vote rigging, including misuse of state resources, voter intimidation, and manipulation of ballot counts (Wilson, 2005, p. 119).

According to several analysts, the electoral process was overshadowed by open support for Yanukovych from Russia, including a media campaign targeting Yushchenko. A

major incident in this context was the dioxin poisoning of Yushchenko in September 2004, which led to a serious deterioration of his health and a visible physical transformation. This event further polarized public opinion and increased the mobilization of Yushchenko's supporters (Marplies, 2005, p. 322).

The mass protests that followed, organized by Yushchenko's supporters, were characterized by peaceful resistance, public gatherings, and blockades in front of administrative buildings. The protests received support from Western countries, particularly the United States and the European Union, which openly called for respect for democratic principles. The European Union, through representatives such as Javier Solana, actively mediated between the opposing sides to prevent the escalation of conflict (Kuzio, 2006, p. 287).

The Supreme Court of Ukraine, under strong public pressure, annulled the results of the second round and ordered a repeat of the vote. The third round, held on December 26, 2004, resulted in a victory for Viktor Yushchenko, who secured 52% of the votes, marking a significant triumph for pro-Western forces in Ukraine (Taneski, 2010, p. 46).

Yushchenko's victory not only signified the triumph of pro-Western policies in Ukraine but also created a new political landscape where pro-Western and pro-Russian factions became increasingly divided. This was reflected in subsequent political turbulence, especially in the strained relationship between Yushchenko and his Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, who quickly entered into political conflicts after the formation of the new government (Kudelia, 2007, p. 58).

Western support for the revolution, including financial and technical assistance to non-governmental organizations, played a crucial role in ensuring the transparency of the electoral process. The Orange Revolution represented a triumph of democratic values but simultaneously deepened Ukraine's geopolitical divisions (Kirkova, 2015, p. 74).

The social and economic consequences of the revolution were also significant. Although the revolution stimulated Ukraine's democratic development, it also led to increased economic uncertainty. According to the World Bank (2006), the political instability following the revolution resulted in a slowdown of economic growth and a decline in foreign investment. Additionally, the Russian government began to exert energy pressure as a tool of influence over the new Ukrainian leadership, culminating in the gas crisis of 2006.

In addition to its political consequences, the Orange Revolution fostered the emergence of a new generation of political leaders and activists who continued to play an important role in Ukrainian politics. The revolution had a lasting impact on Ukrainian society, laying the foundations for subsequent democratic movements while simultaneously opening the path for future conflicts between pro-Western and pro-Russian forces.

Maidan Protests

The Maidan protests (2013–2014) represent one of the most significant events in Ukraine's modern history. They began as a reaction to President Viktor Yanukovych's decision to suspend the process of signing an association agreement with the European Union and to pursue closer ties with Russia (Onuch, 2014, p. 45). This decision caused widespread disappointment among many Ukrainians, who viewed the European Union as a symbol of economic progress and democratic values. Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in

Kyiv became the center of mass gatherings where citizens expressed their dissatisfaction with Yanukovych's policies.

In addition to economic and political factors, the protests were fueled by accumulated dissatisfaction with systemic corruption, clientelism, and abuse of power by Yanukovych's regime. According to Transparency International (2013), Ukraine was among the most corrupt countries in Europe at the time, further motivating the population to demand reforms.

Initially, the protests were peaceful and organized by youth movements, students, and opposition parties. Demonstrators demanded a return to the European integration process and greater transparency in governance. However, the violent dispersal of the protest camp by special police units "Berkut" in December 2013 led to the radicalization of the movement. Citizens from various regions of Ukraine joined the demonstrations, demanding Yanukovych's resignation and the protection of democratic rights (Kirkova, 2015, p. 73).

The movement gained support from numerous intellectuals, activists, and artists, who used social media as a tool for mobilization. Hashtags such as #Euromaidan became symbols of resistance, highlighting the role of digital platforms in modern democratic revolutions (Bohdanova, 2014, p. 132).

In January 2014, the government adopted a series of repressive laws that significantly restricted freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly. These measures, known as the "dictatorship laws," provoked strong reactions from the international community, including the European Union and the United States (Hadzi Janev, 2017, p. 89). On the ground, protesters began organizing barricades and self-defense units to protect the square from police interventions.

The culmination of the protests occurred in February 2014 when violence reached its peak. Over three days of intense clashes (February 18–20), more than a hundred people were killed, many of them civilians. These events, known as the "Bloody Maidan," intensified international condemnation of Yanukovych's regime and led to strengthened sanctions by the West (Onuch, 2014, p. 49).

One of the most infamous incidents associated with the Maidan violence was the massacre of demonstrators by snipers. Although the exact circumstances and orders for the use of lethal force remain under investigation, this act significantly undermined Yanukovych's legitimacy and intensified calls for his removal (Snyder, 2018, p. 85).

On February 22, 2014, under public and opposition pressure, Viktor Yanukovych fled Kyiv, and the Ukrainian parliament voted to remove him from office. A provisional government was formed, taking responsibility for stabilizing the situation and continuing the European integration process. This period marked the beginning of a new era for Ukraine but also revealed deep structural weaknesses that would become critical in future conflicts (Taneski, 2015, p. 87).

Western countries played an important role during the protests. The European Union consistently called for dialogue and respect for democratic principles, while the United States provided financial and logistical support to civil society organizations and activists (Pifer, 2017, p. 112). This intervention was perceived by Russia as direct interference in Ukraine's internal affairs, further deepening geopolitical tensions.

The influence of the protests extended beyond the change of government. Maidan became a symbol of the struggle for democratic reforms and the rule of law, with many activists later entering Ukrainian politics. However, the conflicts in eastern Ukraine and the

Russian annexation of Crimea demonstrated that the protests also intensified the geopolitical clash between the West and Russia (McFaul, 2018, p. 29).

Germany, as one of the leading actors in the European Union, played a mediating role during the crisis. Chancellor Angela Merkel consistently emphasized that dialogue was the only path to conflict resolution. German diplomacy was active in coordinating the EU's joint efforts to impose sanctions on the Ukrainian regime and provide humanitarian support to the victims of violence (Kundnani, 2015, p. 37). Additionally, Germany provided substantial financial assistance to Ukraine to support economic stabilization after the protests.

The Maidan protests were not only an expression of political will but also a deeply rooted social uprising against corruption and dysfunctional institutions. The demonstrations symbolized the struggle for dignity, freedom, and a future in which Ukraine would be integrated into the European family of nations (Kirkova, 2015, p. 74).

The legacy of Maidan is still evident today – many Ukrainians continue to defend the values they fought for in 2013–2014, which has become especially important in the context of the Russian invasion of 2022. At the same time, there are criticisms that not all the promises of the protest movement have been fulfilled, leaving room for further political reforms in Ukraine (Wilson, 2022, p. 41). The Revolution of Dignity remains a crucial moment in Ukrainian history that redefined the country's path toward democracy.

Annexation of Crimea

The annexation of Crimea by Russia in February 2014 is considered one of the most controversial events in contemporary geopolitics. This intervention occurred after the Maidan protests and the removal of Viktor Yanukovych from the presidency, creating a political vacuum in Ukraine. Russia justified its actions by claiming to protect the Russian population in Crimea, which expressed fear of the new pro-Western government in Kyiv. According to official Kremlin rhetoric, Kyiv was under the influence of "nationalist" and "neo-Nazi" forces, a narrative further used to legitimize the military intervention (Sakwa, 2015, p. 120).

However, many analysts interpret it as a strategic decision by Vladimir Putin to strengthen Russian influence in the Black Sea region (Charron, 2016, p. 242). Crimea holds immense military significance for Russia, serving as the base of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol, which is crucial for projecting military power in the region (Giles, 2014, p. 53).

Vladimir Putin justified the seizure of Crimea by emphasizing the peninsula's historical and cultural ties to Russia and the need to protect the rights of the ethnic Russian majority. Historically, Crimea was part of the Russian Empire from 1783, after being annexed following the Russo-Turkish wars. After World War II, Crimea remained part of the Soviet Union as a territory of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. In 1954, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea to Ukraine as a gesture of fraternity and closeness between the two peoples, without anticipating future geopolitical implications (Taneski, 2010, p. 46).

During the Soviet period, Crimea served as a key military and tourist base. The peninsula hosted significant Soviet military facilities, including the strategic Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol, which played a vital role in the Soviet Union's geopolitical ambitions (Gjurovski, 2018, p. 103). Additionally, Crimea was a popular tourist destination due to its beaches and natural resources.

The dominant population in Crimea during the Soviet Union era consisted mainly of ethnic Russians, who made up more than half of the population. Alongside them lived significant numbers of Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars. The Crimean Tatars historically represented the most vulnerable community in the region, particularly after their deportation by Stalin in 1944, when approximately 200,000 Tatars were forcibly relocated to Central Asia (Williams, 2015, p. 211).

The intervention began with the appearance of the so-called "little green men" – armed soldiers without insignias – who seized key facilities on the peninsula, including government buildings and military bases. Russian forces simultaneously blockaded the Ukrainian Navy, preventing any military response from Kyiv (Gjurovski, 2018, p. 104).

The reactions of the Crimean population to the Russian intervention were divided. A significant portion of the ethnic Russian majority welcomed the Russian occupation enthusiastically, viewing it as an opportunity for reunification with Russia, a country with which they felt strong cultural and historical ties. Pro-Russian segments of the population greeted Russian troops as liberators, and pro-Russian rallies were held in several cities, including Simferopol (Charron, 2016, p. 244).

On the other hand, a significant number of Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars opposed the intervention, fearing repression and the loss of their rights. The Crimean Tatars, who had historically suffered under Soviet rule, viewed the Russian annexation as a threat to their cultural and political autonomy (Plokhy, 2017, p. 238). Soon after the annexation, cases of disappearances and political pressure against the Tatar population were reported, prompting condemnation by international human rights organizations (Amnesty International, 2016, p. 67).

The referendum on Crimea's accession to the Russian Federation was held on March 16, 2014, just a few weeks after the military intervention. According to official Russian sources, 97% of voters supported joining Russia; however, the referendum was conducted under conditions of military occupation and without observation by independent international bodies, rendering it illegitimate under international standards (Pifer, 2017, p. 110).

The annexation of Crimea is often compared to Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, although significant differences and controversies exist between the two cases. Russia uses the situation in Kosovo as a precedent for its actions in Crimea, claiming that the Crimean referendum is analogous to Kosovo's independence declaration. According to Moscow, both cases involve the right of peoples to self-determination (Lavrov, 2014, p. 15).

However, the West rejects this comparison, arguing that Kosovo's independence followed years of armed conflict, ethnic cleansing, and a NATO intervention aimed at preventing a humanitarian catastrophe. Furthermore, Kosovo's independence was supported by international organizations such as the United Nations, while Crimea's annexation was unilaterally executed by Russia under conditions of military occupation (Charron, 2016, p. 248).

The annexation of Crimea altered the security landscape in Europe, demonstrating Russia's ability to employ hybrid warfare methods, including information warfare, economic pressure, and military intervention without an official declaration of war (Galeotti, 2017, p. 89). This comparison remains the subject of intense debate, highlighting the divergent perspectives on international law and geopolitical interests (Plokhy, 2017, p. 241).

Self-Proclaimed Pro-Russian People's Republics

The conflict in Donbas began in April 2014, when pro-Russian separatists declared the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. This development directly followed the removal of Viktor Yanukovych and the pro-European orientation of the new Ukrainian government, which announced reforms conflicting with the interests of the pro-Russian regions (Marples, 2017, p. 201).

Pro-Russian activists, seizing government buildings in Donetsk on April 7, 2014, proclaimed the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), while the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) was declared on April 27, 2014, in Luhansk. The armed forces of the DPR were estimated at between 15,000 and 20,000 fighters, while the LPR maintained around 10,000 to 15,000 (Tsygankov, 2015, p. 68; Gjurovski, 2018, p. 95). Initially composed of local volunteers, former Ukrainian army personnel, and paramilitary units, the separatist forces increasingly relied on Russian military support over time (Kudelia, 2016, p. 88).

In May 2014, both DPR and LPR held referendums on independence. Organizers claimed that 89% in the DPR and 96% in the LPR voted in favor of independence, but these figures were disputed by the international community due to a lack of transparency and legitimacy (Delfi, 2023). According to OSCE reports, the referendums were conducted without legal basis, under threats, and without international monitoring, rendering them illegitimate in the eyes of Western countries (OSCE, 2014).

Russian support played a critical role in the escalation of the conflict. This included the delivery of weapons, ammunition, and heavy equipment, as well as the presence of "little green men"—unidentified armed personnel later acknowledged as Russian soldiers. Additionally, Russia deployed up to 20,000 mercenaries through the Wagner paramilitary group, recruited from Syria, Libya, and other regions, to participate in the fighting in Donbas (Milevski, 2022, p. 42; Fokus.mk, 2023). Intelligence sources suggest that much of the Russian support was organized through so-called "humanitarian convoys," which transported military equipment and logistical supplies to the separatists (Galeotti, 2019, p. 75).

Fierce battles for strategic sites such as Donetsk Airport began in May 2014 and lasted eight months, culminating in the airport's complete destruction in January 2015. These events illustrate the harsh conditions and heavy losses suffered by both sides (Delfi, 2023). Ukrainian forces, known as the "Cyborgs," fiercely defended the airport to the last moment, and this battle became a symbol of resistance against the separatist forces (Kudelia, 2016, p. 92).

According to Gjurovski (2018, p. 95), the conflict in Donbas was not merely local but part of a broader Russian strategy to destabilize Ukraine. This strategy was consistent with the concept of "hybrid warfare," which involved the use of irregular military forces, cyber-attacks, and propaganda to weaken the Ukrainian government (Snegovaya, 2020, p. 53).

Propaganda and information warfare played a significant role in shaping international perceptions of the crisis. The polarization of media narratives further deepened tensions (Milevski, 2022, p. 42). Russian media portrayed the Kyiv government as illegitimate and violent, while Ukrainian media emphasized Russia's role as the aggressor, complicating prospects for a diplomatic solution (Zygar, 2017, p. 114).

The human toll of the conflict has been devastating. According to the United Nations, between 13,200 and 13,400 people, including 3,390 civilians, were killed from the beginning

of the conflict through the end of 2021 (Delfi, 2023). UNICEF reports catastrophic impacts on the civilian population, with over 1.6 million people displaced and thousands deprived of access to essential resources (UNICEF, 2021).

The lack of effective diplomatic intervention by the international community contributed to the prolongation of the conflict, leaving deep scars on the local population and regional stability (Charron, 2016, p. 250). Efforts to achieve a ceasefire through the Minsk Agreements (2014 and 2015) failed to bring lasting peace, as both sides violated the terms (Minsk Agreements, OSCE, 2015).

The conflict in Donbas became a persistent source of instability, marked by periodic escalations and limited attempts at diplomatic resolution. The Ukrainian government accused the separatists of continuous attacks on civilian settlements, while pro-Russian forces claimed that Ukrainian troops used banned artillery against Donetsk and Luhansk (HRW, 2019).

The international community remained divided on how to resolve the crisis, while the local population continued to suffer from the consequences of prolonged hostilities.

Special Military Operation

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a military invasion of Ukraine, triggering strong condemnation from Western countries, including the European Union (EU) and the United States (US). This invasion represents the largest armed conflict in Europe since World War II and has dramatically altered relations between Russia and the West, leading to one of the most serious global security crises in modern history (Freedman, 2022, p. 17).

Western leaders assessed the action as a serious violation of international law and Ukrainian sovereignty, imposing a series of sanctions against Russia and providing military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine (CNN, 2022; Mileski, 2022, p. 39). Sanctions included freezing Russian foreign currency reserves, excluding certain Russian banks from the SWIFT system, and restricting the export of advanced technologies to Russia (EU Sanctions Report, 2022).

In the early morning hours of February 24, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the so-called "special military operation" in Ukraine, claiming its aim was the "demilitarization and denazification" of the country. According to Putin's statements, Russia did not intend to occupy Ukrainian territory, but rather to protect the (Russian) people whom he alleged were subjected to mistreatment and genocide by Ukrainian authorities (BBC, 2022; Taneski, 2022, p. 49). However, these claims were dismissed by the UN and Western countries as propaganda without factual basis (UN Report, 2022).

Russian forces, marked with the letter "Z", crossed multiple border points into Ukraine, advancing from the north, east, and south. The initial invasion involved over 150,000 Russian troops, supported by tanks, artillery, and air forces (AP, 2022; Mileski, 2022, p. 39). This offensive was based on a Russian strategy of a rapid advance ("blitzkrieg"), aimed at quickly capturing Kyiv and replacing the Ukrainian government (Galeotti, 2022, p. 23).

From the north, via Belarus, Russian forces swiftly approached Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, intending to encircle and seize the city. According to Western intelligence analyses, Russian military command expected Kyiv to fall within a few days, but the resilience of the Ukrainian resistance was significantly underestimated (RAND Corporation, 2023).

Russian military operations targeted the capture of major urban centers, while simultaneously destroying critical infrastructure and military targets. In Kyiv, Russian troops encountered strategic counterattacks by the Ukrainian army, which employed Western-supplied anti-tank weapons (BBC, 2022; Taneski, 2022, p. 49). The American Javelin anti-tank system and Turkish Bayraktar drones played a crucial role in Ukraine's defense (Pentagon Report, 2022).

Significant fighting also occurred around strategic facilities such as airports and communication centers. One of the most pivotal moments of the first phase of the war was the unsuccessful attempt to capture Hostomel Airport, which was critical for Russia's plan to rapidly take Kyiv (The Guardian, 2022).

One of the most symbolic attacks during the initial weeks of the invasion was the destruction of the world's largest transport aircraft, the Antonov An-225 "Mriya," which was damaged during the fighting near Hostomel Airport in Kyiv (AP, 2022; Mileski, 2022, p. 39). This event sparked strong emotions in Ukraine and beyond, as "Mriya" was seen as a symbol of the engineering ingenuity of both the former Soviet Union and Ukraine (BBC, 2022).

Additionally, Russian forces managed to destroy a significant portion of Ukraine's air defense systems, weakening its ability to defend its airspace in the early days of the attack. However, with the arrival of Western military aid, Ukraine significantly improved its air defense capabilities, leading to increased Russian losses in aviation (NATO Report, 2023).

The special military operation caused the mass displacement of the Ukrainian population. Thousands of civilians sought shelter in underground subways and bunkers, while millions fled to neighboring countries, creating one of the largest humanitarian crises in Europe since World War II (UNHCR, 2022; Mileski, 2022). According to UN data, more than 8 million people had fled Ukraine by the end of 2022, marking the largest refugee crisis in Europe since 1945 (UNHCR, 2023).

Cities such as Kharkiv, Mariupol, and Bucha became symbols of civilian suffering due to widespread destruction and reports of war crimes against the local population (HRW, 2022; Taneski, 2022, p. 49). Investigations by international organizations found evidence of mass executions of civilians in Bucha, leading to a new wave of sanctions against Russia (Amnesty International, 2023).

In April 2022, Russian forces withdrew from northern Ukraine and refocused on the eastern Donbas region, where the conflict escalated into an intense artillery war. This tactical shift resulted from the heavy losses suffered by Russian forces, as well as logistical problems and low morale among Russian troops (ISW, 2023).

This change in strategy was driven by the unexpectedly strong resistance of the Ukrainian army and the mobilization of the international community to support Ukraine (BBC, 2022; CNN, 2022; Taneski, 2022, p. 49). As a result, the conflict in Donbas became one of the most intense and protracted fronts of the war (ISW, 2023).

Conclusion

This study concludes that the history of Ukraine is a fundamental narrative of the struggle for national independence and cultural identity, a struggle that has persisted through centuries of extraordinary hardships. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine's path to sovereignty has been shaped by numerous challenges, including political

crises, corruption, and increased external pressures. The Orange Revolution and the Maidan protests showcased the Ukrainian people's strong aspiration for democracy and the rule of law. In this context, the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donbas sharpened the geopolitical confrontation, turning Ukraine into a central battleground of global tensions. The analysis reveals that Ukraine is not merely a geographical or political entity, but a strategic linchpin where the interests of major global powers intersect.

Moreover, Ukraine symbolizes a pivotal shift that disrupted the balance between the world's great powers. On one side, Russia views Ukraine as a strategic zone critical to maintaining its regional influence through economic and military means. On the other, the United States and the European Union see Ukraine as a frontline state in the broader contest to defend democracy and curb Russian hegemony. The Russian annexation of Crimea, military operations in Donbas, and the launch of the "Special Military Operation" in 2022 intensified this clash, marking Ukraine as a critical fault line in the evolving global order.

Economically, Ukraine's attempts to forge agreements with the United States for the extraction and exploitation of critical minerals—including lithium, nickel, and cobalt—introduced a new dimension to its geopolitical relevance. These resources are essential to the high-tech industries and green transitions of the future. Reducing Western dependence on Chinese and Russian supplies elevated Ukraine's strategic importance in the global economy, while simultaneously posing a direct threat to Russia's dominance over key resources. This move was perceived by Moscow not only as an economic challenge but also as a strategic encirclement that threatened to diminish Russia's leverage in global energy and raw materials markets. Strengthening Ukraine's role as an alternative supplier aligned closely with Western efforts to reduce vulnerabilities in critical supply chains, further intensifying the geopolitical competition between East and West. Therefore, Ukraine's independence is not only a political and military issue but also an economic one, further consolidating its role as a decisive player in international relations.

History shows that despite immense adversities, the Ukrainian people have demonstrated resilience, forging a strong identity and a clear vision for their future. Modern Ukraine stands not just as a nation-state but as a powerful symbol of the global struggle for freedom, sovereignty, and democratic values. The ongoing conflict with Russia underscores both Ukraine's internal resilience and its global significance in shaping the future of international relations. Ukraine's state-building process reflects an unwavering commitment to the ideals of liberty, peace, and prosperity—even at the cost of tremendous sacrifices.

At the same time, Ukraine remains of profound strategic significance to Russia due to its critical geopolitical position, its energy transit infrastructure, and its maritime access through the Crimean Peninsula. Serving as a bridge between East and West and as a buffer zone, control over Ukraine enables Russia to project greater power regionally and globally, particularly in the face of NATO expansion. Despite the construction of alternative pipelines such as Nord Stream, Ukraine's gas transit network continues to be vital for Russia's energy strategy. For these reasons, Ukraine is and will continue to be a focal point in the broader geopolitical rivalry.

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