

ON THE ORIGINS OF GEOPOLITICAL AND INFORMATION WARFARE PREPARATIONS FOR THE WAR AGAINST UKRAINE BY THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION IN THE PIVOTAL MOMENTS OF THE CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN RELATIONS

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Introduction

They say the more things change, the more they stay the same. The Russian Federation, being the latest incarnation of Muscovy, has shown plenty of political tricks in its belligerence against Ukraine that can be dated back to Soviet, Imperial, even Tsarist and Ducal incarnations of the realm. Yet throughout its recent history it has been given an outspoken *carte blanche* for said belligerence, as its preparations for both limited and full-scale invasions started nearly since the beginning of the nation's existence. All the signs signifying Moscow's imperial resurgence were ignored, while statements regarding the Kremlin's peaceful narrative were emphasized. This massive spread of wishful thinking in analysis of Muscovite-Ukrainian relations engulfed many researchers, including the person writing this very lines, as a hopeful freshman studying history. In most cases the *realpolitik* issue of a massive threat to the economies of both countries large enough to stop any ideas of an outright war. Thus Moscow's *ideapolitik* reasoning in preparation for war was discounted as propaganda for a nationalist audience used to outset internal issues, which were not much use for rallying patriotic fervor. The Kremlin's actions in 2014–2021 provided some dubious solace for such claims – indeed, Moscow did not wish to risk its considerable trade relations with Ukraine, and so the invasion was limited regionally, so as not to damage trade more than necessary. Moreover, Putin's administration refused to claim responsibility until it was certain that the success could not be overturned and that the resulting international sanctions were subdued – for example, Putin himself fully recognized that the “local Crimean self-defense militia” were the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation only in 2015.

With Putin's 2022 announcement of a “special operation” Moscow unmasked itself completely, suffering the most massive sanctions response in history and facing largest losses in a military confrontation since World War II. This has confirmed that the opposite of what many students of history and international relations expected was true – the Kremlin was ready to abandon realism and risk tremendous economic losses for the sake of a war grounded on pure symbolism of “imperial reconquest”. Acknowledging this reality prompts a question: what data was discounted previously, that Moscow's open war against Ukraine was deemed an

unlikely scenario? Perhaps, misattributed, rather than discounted? After all, as much as Muscovy always seethed in revanchism, the high number of various declarations of friendship, support and bilateral cooperation with Ukraine in its pre-2014 history could also not be ignored. That, in itself, is history's lesson for both the researchers and laymen – Muscovite passion for conquest never stopped, and that passion should be trusted more so than any official statements – various “volunteer fighters for People's Republics” never tried to hide their affiliation and goals, while official Kremlin claimed that those were “not their troops” until the bitter end.

Problem statement and its relation to important research and practical tasks. The problem that this research deals with is information warfare, specifically in its propaganda-related ideological sense, rather than the cyberwarfare part. Moscow's exercises in psychological operations on both its home audience and people abroad are vast and require research, for both scholarly and practical reasons. However, this paper mostly concerns Russian actions in the scope of bilateral Russian-Ukrainian relations on an official level, mostly diplomacy and economic talks, along with the information climate that accompanied them. Simply put, something as large as the creation and operation of Muscovite “home front” of the information warfare, its massive propaganda keeping the various peoples of the Federation in line, while priming them for a war of conquest without shame or regret deserves its own comprehensive research. This paper is more of a review of errors in previous analysis, needed to see which voices from Muscovy were listened to, and which ones were discounted. This can help further research on the role of history and ideology in information warfare, along with accomplishing practical tasks related to spreading awareness of the Russian Federation's preparations for war long before the first shots were fired in 2014 Crimea.

Analysis of recent research publications. Although it is disputed on when exactly it may be prudent to separate history from contemporary politics, professional historians started writing on the recent history of Ukraine's relations with the Russian Federation back in 1990s. The 2014 war, however, forced many to stop with the previously hopeful analyses and look at the facts. An example would be a recent work on Ukrainian-Russian geopolitical coexistence in 1992–2020 by

Ivan Artiomov and Iryna Cherevko, where the authors note how the Crimean issue was always used by Moscow as an instrument of probing the current status of Ukrainian politicum, to see just how much they could act in response to that issue¹. Another recent publication was a study on regional differences in response to the critical changes in Russian-Ukrainian relations by Ihor and Natalia Todorovs². Previous studies on Russian international integration policies on the post-Soviet space also saw a new light with the 2014 invasion, seen in Serhiy Troyan's 2019 article³. Rather important were statements by the Director of the National Institute for Strategic Studies, Academician of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine Volodymyr Horbulin presented analytical materials – as an insider on the workings of Ukrainian presidential administrations and one of the authors of various editions of Ukrainian foreign policy strategies, he recognized that despite agreements on recognizing Ukraine's borders, the Russian Federation slowed down the process of demarcating the state border with Ukraine, as in refraining from actually marking it on the ground. Having slowed down the disintegration processes in Russia and reliably cemented the economic and political elite the new Moscow leadership, led by Vladimir Putin, moved directly to the implementation of the revanchist strategy, wanting to revisit the previous promises to Ukraine, notes Volodymyr Horbulin⁴. In comparison, previous publications (2010) trying to give a prognosis on Russian-Ukrainian relations for the next ten years (until 2020) did not foresee war as a possibility⁵.

Identification of previously unresolved issues of the topic. Recognizing the previous researchers' merits, specifically centering on Crimea as the “probing issue” that Moscow used to determine Ukraine's (and the West's) readiness to respond to provocation and aggression, some questions need to be answered. Did the Russian Federation of the 1990s prepare for war with Ukraine, or was it Putin's own idea, as many in

the media speak of it as, painting an image of a “mad dictator”? What were the plans discussed in Yeltsin's administration? Did they concern Crimea only, or were the ideas behind projects to conquer the whole south of Ukraine already at place back then? Basically: just how long did Moscow prepare for the eventual war, and what did it consider alternatives to waging said war? Finally, what is really needed is to present Ukrainian findings to a foreign audience in English, because too often do specialists in “Russia and Eurasia studies” leave them with nuanced, but Moscow-oriented views on the topic. As such, a look into memoirs of Ukrainian policy-makers of the 1990s could provide important context to just how were the Russian-Ukrainian treaties on borders, Crimean status and the military negotiated, and what half-forgotten, or unspoken threats came from Moscow.

Goal statement (task statement). The goal of the paper is to re-analyze various previously known treaties, events, statements and data from the history of contemporary Muscovite-Ukrainian relations prior to the election of Viktor Yanukovich as the President of Ukraine, so as to see how those events and statements related to building up a powerbase and a potent justification for further actions before the start of Moscow's invasion in 2014. The tasks to reach that goal will be: analyzing the earliest bilateral treaties and the commentary on those left by the active participants of diplomacy back then, to find out what elements of Russian-Ukrainian confrontation were left forgotten; showing how the situation developed under the later administrations (post-Yeltsin in Russia and post-Kravchuk in Ukraine) and whether the signed treaties had any merit; finding whether the Crimean question was the only “probing issue” (as identified by previous researchers) used by Moscow to test Ukraine's and the wider West's capability to answer any attempts to circumvent international law; translating the results for an English-reading audience.

Presentation of research material and findings. In 1991 Ukraine left the USSR. This political decision, supported by a national referendum, was based on not just ideological, but also economical reasoning, relating to geopolitics. The share of the Ukrainian SSR in the total Soviet GNP (about 20%) was not proportionally reflected in the investments that Ukraine contributed to the development of other parts of the USSR. No new, larger projects for the development of industry or transport and huge construction were implemented in Ukraine. On the other hand, the construction of the so-called Dnipro cascade of hydropower plants was completed, which provided electricity not only for consumption in Ukraine, but also for export. At the same time, the central Moscow leadership continued to spend significantly on weapons and the costly space program.

Although supported and spearheaded by local political authorities from the former Communist Party, such as the first President of Ukraine Leonid Kravchuk, the

¹ Артёмов И., Черевко И. Украинско-росийські відносини 1992-2020 рр.: зовнішньополітичний аспект. *Геополітика України історія і сучасність*. №1(24). Травень 2020. DOI: 10.24144/2078-1431.2020.1(24).27-40

² Тодоров І., Тодорова Н. Українські міжрегіональні відмінності в контексті ро-сійської агресії проти України в 2014-2015 рр. *Геополітика України: історія і сучасність: збірник наукових праць*. Вип. 1 (14). / ред. кол.: І.В. Артёмов (голова) та ін. Ужгород: ДВНЗ «УжНУ», 2015. 236 с. С. 29–42.

³ Троян С. С. Сучасні українсько-росийські відносини у форматі інтеграційних планів Російської Федерації. *Дриновський збірник*. Том 9. 2016. С. 357–367. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7546/DS.2016.09.37>

⁴ Горбулін С. Крим. Війна: передумови російської агресії. *РНБО України*. 2016. URL: <https://www.rnbo.gov.ua/ua/Diialnist/2399.html>

⁵ Шинкарук К. Україна – Росія: сценарії розвитку відносин до 2020 року. *Компас 2020. Україна у міжнародних відносинах. Цілі, інструменти, перспективи*. Київ: Фонд ім. Фрідріха Еберта: представництво в Україні, 2010. URL: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ukraine/07748.pdf>

independence of Ukraine was immediately recognized by various forces striving for national revival. At the ceremonial session of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on August 22, 1992 in Kyiv, Mykola Plavchuk, the leader of the historical Ukrainian People's Republic (UPR) in exile, declared that independent Ukraine was the legal successor of the Ukrainian People's Republic. Leonid Kravchuk wrote in his memoirs that even before the adoption of the Declaration of State Sovereignty of Ukraine, which took place on July 16, 1990, there was a fierce struggle "of Moscow for the preservation of the ending Soviet empire." Prior to that, the declaration of the honor to sovereign sovereignty between Russia and Ukraine was declared in the third paragraph of the "Communique on the results of negotiations between the official delegations of Ukraine and the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic"⁶.

However, the path to these declarations was not without issues. The advisor to the President of the Soviet Union A. Cherniayev provides an insider look into the relations between Ukrainian, Russian and overall Soviet governments in his memoirs. Commenting the events of autumn 1991, he shows how angry various forces in Moscow were with Ukraine declaring its independence while keeping full territorial integrity and control over Donbas resources and Crimean sealine. And those comments came from a "liberal" advisor, a supporter of "Russian democratic revival" in the Soviet Union: "October 7, 1991. Kravchuk. On TV. Assigns to himself all nuclear missiles, and the Donbas, and the Crimea... Idiot... Does he think that Sevastopol belongs to him?! No... even the biggest "democrat" here, if he is Russian, he will stand against it... And that's how will it be! [...] November 9, 1991 What does this mean? That Russia has taken a course according to Burbulis: one, indivisible and without any of those who want to become independent – throw off their burden! That they will rule in Russia with an iron fist... in the name of democracy and the market. And that Ukraine will leave ... And for the Crimea ... + Sevastopol, maybe Donbass and Odessa ... they will have to deal with Burbulis ... And the hohols [anti-Ukrainian slur] will have to tighten their tails!"⁷. Such sentiments were not uncommon – in the conditions of a food crisis in the Russian Federation, news media blamed Ukraine for the lack of food supply to Moscow and the surrounding regions, and, according to "Moskovskiye novosti", the top Soviet politicians in Moscow discussed possibilities of a nuclear exchange after a strike at Ukraine, while Russian Federation's new hope, President Boris Yeltsin, had a private discussion with

the United States of America's President George Bush to prevent Ukraine's separation from Russia at all costs⁸.

Prior to that Ukraine has shown that such threats go against treaties made back in 1990 and 1991. In his memoirs President of Ukraine and longtime politician Leonid Kuchma retells these events, seen by him as a member of Ukraine's official delegations on talks with the new Yeltsin Administration: "On August 26, 1991, two days after the adoption of the Act of Independence of Ukraine, a threatening statement was issued by a spokesman for the Russian president. It stated that "in the event of termination of allied relations (with the republics of the USSR), the Russian Federation reserves the right to raise the issue of revision of borders." On the one hand, the press secretary always announces the president's opinion, not his own, but on the other hand, these words were not uttered by the president himself, which was not a coincidence. The Russian president clearly had no desire to publicly renounce his image of a democratic politician. Shortly before that, in an address to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, Yeltsin said that Russia has no plans to become the center of a new empire and it does not seek any advantage over other republics. A few months earlier, on November 19, 1990, the RSFSR and the USSR signed an agreement establishing mutual recognition of existing borders – even if within the USSR (otherwise they would not need to be "mutually recognized" again in the 1997 "Great Treaty"), those were still official borders, which were considered under the Soviet constitution, one way or another, state borders. [...] The statement of the press secretary, in theory, applied to all the disintegrating republics of the USSR, which had common borders with Russia, but first of all it was addressed, as it seems, to Ukraine, although there was an issue with Estonia on Narva – Ivangorod, there was Georgia with Abkhazia. the titular population of which has long since been part of Russia. In any case, all the comments of Russian politicians after Voshchanov's statement concerned Ukraine and only Ukraine. I still remember well how on August 29 G. H. Popov, the mayor of Moscow and the triumphant defender of the White House, appeared on television. When asked by the journalist what territories of Ukraine Russia can make the subject of its claims, he answered with a Ukrainian accent (being undoubtedly Greek, seems he came from somewhere in the south of Ukraine): "Of course, Crimea in the first place. But there are other Russian lands in Ukraine! Let's say this... what's its name... Dnepropetrovsk!" I suspect that he really meant Donetsk, but the euphoria of winning over the August coup gave [Yeltsin's administration] every reason to take even such reservations seriously.

In an instant there was, as they say, an international scandal. Due to this, on August 28, 1991, a Russian state delegation headed by Vice President of the Rus-

⁶ Коммюнике по итогам переговоров между официальными делегациями Украины и Российской Советской Федеративной Социалистической Республики URL: http://zakon.rada.gov.ua/cgi-bin/laws/main.cgi?nreg=643_014

⁷ Черняев А. Советская политика 1972-1991 гг. – взгляд изнутри. 1991 год. URL: https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Chernyaev/1991.pdf

⁸ Гончар О. Щоденники. Том III. 2003. С. 381-391.

sian Federation Aleksandr Rutsky arrived in Kyiv. I remember exactly that the delegation included Anatoliy Sobchak and Sergey Stankevich (maybe there were also Poltoranin and Burbulis). Probably because the visit was prepared in "emergency" mode, the Russians improvised. So why did the envoys of Russia, the Democrats, come to such an atmosphere, when shortly before that, I repeat, they defeated the imperial dragon in Moscow? It turns out that they seriously hoped to persuade the Ukrainian brothers to stop halfway. Like, call yourself at least twice sovereign and three times independent, but do not try to withdraw from the new union treaty, and Moscow will owe you a favor for it. They sincerely hoped (at least there was such an impression) that they would explain to the ignorant people of Kyiv: there is no difference between Russians and Ukrainians, they could promise several senior positions in Moscow, and our fools would scratch their heads and say: "That's right! Thank you guys for explaining it to us so well. Truly, the devil nearly led us astray." Needless to say, none of the newcomers (and this is fully in line with the spirit of late Soviet thinking) was at all familiar with Ukrainian issues... Of course, neither the Russian delegation nor anyone else could change anything. And yet, if our guests had been more experienced in negotiations, well-versed in Ukrainian affairs, who knows whether or not they would have involved the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, which consisted of essentially the same Soviet people as them, in the need to conclude some small unnecessary deals and would not persuade to give up something temporarily? But all the "home-made" guests, all their tricks were exactly what could be expected from people whose understanding of the national was frozen in the old self-confident Soviet thinking. As for Ukraine, this thinking is usually defined by two phrases: "Kyiv is the mother of Russian cities", "Ancient Russia is the common cradle of the three East Slavic peoples" and the conclusion that means: "You are us, and we are you." That is, you do not exist! With all your supposedly separate history and mentality. In addition, people who think so do not see themselves as doing anything offensive in us, but rather, on the contrary – they, in their opinion, do us a great service by raising us to their own level. They don't really think of offending us, because they are sure that they are just opening family arms!⁹

These memoirs allow us to note that top level Muscovite plans regarding wresting back control over Ukraine were not born with Putin, but back in 1990–1991 there was no confidence in Moscow that they'd easily win in a direct confrontation. As such, Moscow tried negotiations, and failed, having to confirm Ukraine's borders as stationary. However, as

Leonid Kuchma notes, using the technicality of said border treaty being between federal Soviet Republics, rather than two de-jure independent states, Moscow persisted in its threats to Ukrainian territorial integrity on a semi-official level until 1997, when the "Great Treaty" on friendship and cooperation was signed. Even without the "offensive" rhetoric mentioned by Kuchma, Ukrainian leadership had specific economy-related issues with Moscow's actions. Vitaliy Masol, head of the Council of Ministers of the Ukrainian SSR in 1990 and a later Prime Minister in independent Ukraine, who was personally a supporter of the Soviet Union and lamented its fall, nevertheless admitted that there were very real reasons for Ukrainian distrust towards both the old Soviet authorities and the new Russian government under Yeltsin's supporters. According to Masol, Yeltsin's faction usurped traditionally all-union government positions in Moscow and demanded that the Russian Federation's representatives would become the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense in a new, reformed "Union of Sovereign States", with a Central Asian representative as a Deputy Prime Minister. They also, afraid of the possibility of a nuclear conflict with breakaway republics, ordered to concentrate all of Soviet nuclear weapons from Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan in the Russian Federation. Afterwards, Masol tells, the Yeltsinites took over the State Bank of the USSR, with all of its diamond and gold reserves. Faced with refusal of such demands, various Russian FSR representatives threatened to "review territorial issues", despite the aforementioned 1990 treaty¹⁰.

The failure to transform the USSR into the USS further impacted the creation of a new multilateral organization in the former Soviet Union: the Commonwealth of Independent States. The issues started with the fact that Ukraine was a co-founder of the CIS, but the Charter of the organization has not been ratified by Ukraine, so formally Ukraine remained only an observer and not a member of the CIS (despite the fact that President Kuchma was, for a time, a formal head of the CIS). Different countries reacted differently to the creation of the CIS. In a speech at an international forum in Germany on April 4, 1992, Leonid Kravchuk defined the understanding of the new formation as follows: "The CIS is neither a state nor a superpower. It is not a subject of international law and international relations of the CIS – it is a form of cooperation of independent states, which are independently responsible for their internal development and relations with other countries". President Kravchuk's definition was formalized in the Resolution of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine of July 2, 1993 "On the Main

⁹ Кучма Л. Д. Украина – не Россия. Москва: Время, 2003. 559 с. С. 12–17.

¹⁰ Масол В. А. Упущенный шанс: Небеспристрастные размышления экс-премьера Украины о том, что произошло в бывшем Советском Союзе. Киев: Молодь, 1993. 150 с. С. 72–73.

Directions of Ukraine's Foreign Policy”, which declared that, to Ukraine, the CIS is an international mechanism of multilateral consultations and negotiations, which complemented full-scale bilateral relations¹¹.

With Ukraine staying out of full-time membership, in order to solidify Russian influence in the rest of post-Soviet space, the “Agreement on the Establishment of the Joint CIS Armed Forces” was signed on March 20, 1992 without the participation of Ukraine¹².

It should be noted that Ukrainian leadership, in an attempt to resolve all disputes over Ukrainian-Russian relations through negotiations, did not consider Crimea as a subject of Ukrainian-Russian relations and independently resolved existing problems on the peninsula, such as the return of ethnic Crimeans to the homeland they were exiled from by Stalin’s regime and restoration of Crimean autonomy in February 1992, the abolition of the presidency of Crimea in 1995, etc. On the other hand, for Russian lawmakers, the Crimean problem remained relevant. In July 1993, the Russian parliament decided to grant Sevastopol, which is located on the territory of Ukraine, the status of a city of the Russian Federation¹³. The UN Security Council has recognized the groundlessness of this step by Russian lawmakers¹⁴. Geopolitically, the Crimean issue was related to the issue of re-organizing the military leftovers of the Soviet Union. And so, the question of the military heritage of the USSR shaped Ukrainian-Russian relations in the first half of the 1990s, and LM Kravchuk was the first to try to resolve it. In the “Agreement between Ukraine and the Russian Federation on the further development of interstate relations” of June 23, 1992, paragraph 14 said: “In connection with the establishment of its Armed Forces, the Parties reaffirmed the importance of continuing negotiations on the basis of the Black Sea Fleet. They agreed on a contractual basis to use the existing system of bases and logistics. Until the end of the negotiations, the Parties agreed to refrain from unilateral action.” In addition, it was believed that servicemen swear allegiance to the state of which they are citizens¹⁵. Of course, promises alone would not solve the underlying problems.

¹¹ Постанова Верховної Ради України «Про Основні напрями зовнішньої політики України». *Законодавство України*. URL: <http://zakon.rada.gov.ua/cgi-bin/laws/main.cgi?nreg=3360-12>

¹² Соглашение об организации деятельности Главного командования Объединенных Вооруженных Сил Содружества Независимых Государств на переходный период. *Министерство юстиции Кыргызской Республики*. URL: <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/17671?cl=ru-ru>

¹³ Постановление от 9 июля 1993 г. N 5359-1 О статусе города Севастополя. *Consultant*. URL: <http://www.consultant.ru/online/base/?req=doc;base=EXP;n=226150>

¹⁴ Решение Совбеза ООН по Севастополю № S/26118 жалоба Украины, касающаяся постановления Верховного Совета Российской Федерации относительно Севастополя. *UN*. URL: <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/PRO/N93/863/59/IMG/N9386359.pdf?OpenElement/>

¹⁵ Угода між Україною і Російською Федерацією про подальший розвиток міждержавних відносин. *Законодавство України*. URL: http://zakon.rada.gov.ua/cgi-bin/laws/main.cgi?nreg=643_018.

The agreement of August 3, 1992 “On the principles of formation of the Ukrainian Navy and the Russian Navy on the basis of the Black Sea Fleet of the former USSR” revealed the problem of the Black Sea Fleet, which was to be divided between the contracting parties. A transitional period up to and including 1995 was approved, during which the Black Sea Fleet was withdrawn from the CIS and subordinated directly to the Presidents of Ukraine and the Russian Federation. Recruitment of the fleet was carried out in equal proportions (50 percent Russian to 50 percent Ukrainian). During the transition period, the joint use of fleet resources was approved and the transformation of the Black Sea into a nuclear-free zone, a “zone of peace and stability” was declared. This Yalta agreement, signed by Leonid Kravchuk and Boris Yeltsin, still concerned temporary measures and described only a “transitional period”, but the intention of the states to, finally, partition the Black Sea Fleet of the USSR had already been confirmed¹⁶. However, that was not the end to Moscow’s attempts to use the issue of separating military vehicles into providing some sort of control over everyday life in Crimea. The new agreement of June 17, 1993 defined the contractual terms of the Russian Navy in Ukraine was assessed as a “guarantor” of good relations between states. It was believed that the Russian side will participate in the development of the socio-economic sphere of Sevastopol and other settlements of Ukraine, where military units will be stationed¹⁷. De-facto, President Kravchuk agreed to give the majority of the fleet and its infrastructure to Russia at the expense of gas debts, an issue unexpectedly raised during talks in Massandra that Ukraine was unready to talk about and made concessions on. On April 15, 1994, in Moscow, the Presidents signed a decisive treaty, according to which Ukraine was left with 15-20% of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet (specified to be 18,3% in a later treaty)¹⁸.

Although both the opposition politicians and members of Leonid Kravchuk’s own administration blamed their own lack of preparation for the negotiations for the lackluster results, it is hard not to ask: why couldn’t they simply postpone the talks until they could get a better position regarding the “gas debt”, so that it wouldn’t factor into the Crimean and Black Sea Fleet issues altogether? Searching for the answer we turn to the “commentary” part rather than the treaties’ texts

¹⁶ Угода між Україною і Російською Федерацією про принципи формування ВМС України та ВМФ Росії. *Законодавство України*. URL: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/643_020

¹⁷ Угода між Україною та Російською Федерацією про невідкладні заходи по формуванню Військово-Морських Сил України та Військово-Морського Флоту Росії на базі Чорноморського флоту. *Законодавство України*. URL: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/643_046#Text

¹⁸ Угода між Україною та Російською Федерацією про поетапне врегулювання проблем Чорноморського флоту. *Законодавство України*. URL: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/643_128#Text

themselves. Did the 1992–1994 negotiations proceed without issue, bar the aforementioned “gas debts” play by the Russian negotiators? Turns out, a 1992 visit to Moscow coincided with implicit threats of war from the head of the Russian Federation’s ruling parliamentary faction Sergey Baburin. Here is what the Ambassador of Ukraine heard: “Either Ukraine will be reunited with Russia, or there will be war”¹⁹. Previously we’ve quoted memoirs and news media regarding Russian leadership fearing a war against Ukraine, specifically a nuclear war, back in 1990–1991, and now came the implicit threat of war, rather than simple posturing, to see how Ukraine would react. And Ukraine’s reaction was, in a way, satisfactory: the Ukrainian side agreed to unexpected losses in negotiations on the Black Sea Fleet, lost its nuclear capabilities, and has allowed President Yeltsin to save face by blaming threats to territorial integrity on the Parliament – as he’s done already back in 1993, saying that claims to Crimea and Sevastopol were never supported by the Yeltsin administration, despite evidence to the contrary back from 1991.

With Kravchuk administration changed for an, expectedly, pro-Russian Kuchma administration, Moscow makes a new move to solidify control over the CIS. Yeltsin administration’s intentions regarding the CIS were revealed by the Decree "Russia's Strategic Course with the CIS" approved by the President of the Russian Federation on September 14, 1995. In fact, the task of ensuring Russia's dominance in the post-Soviet space was openly put forward, and this "zone of interest" was to include not only "third countries" but also international organizations, while Russia was seen as the undisputed leader of the CIS. The “leading force in the formation of a new system of interstate, political and economic relations in the post-Union space”²⁰. However, Leonid Kuchma’s reply was not what Moscow expected. After consulting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kuchma delivered his comment on Russia’s Strategic Course: “This course does not suit us. We said it out loud. Boris Yeltsin was a champion against empire and for democracy, and we would like him not to deviate from these positions”²¹. Moscow, expecting a quick resolution in Ukraine, only found more diplomatic engagements that lacked compromises on anything bar the removal of Ukraine’s nuclear arsenal.

And so, Moscow has once again requested to look at the issue of the Black Sea Fleet, delaying negotiations (until 1995, and then until the final 1999 treaty) to have a reason to intervene in the Crimean affairs on legal grounds agreed upon in Yalta talks, as the existence of the fleet was associated with the Crimean infrastructure. While the negotiations were delayed by the Russian

side, the Ukrainian side was accused in 1996 of ignoring the “objective necessity” of negotiations on the “Russian status” of Sevastopol with the Russian Federation. Only with the “Great Treaty” of 1997 would the tension over the Sevastopol / Black Sea Fleet problem be officially reduced²². President Kuchma’s rhetoric on Moscow softened by 1998–1999, with him creating a “Russian-Ukrainian anti-crisis group” under Serhiy Tyhypko, while still declaring pursuit for a European integration perspective, as part of his “many vector policy”. Yet the Russian economic contacts with Ukraine and arms sales in exchange for more “gas debts forgiveness” intensified, which made Moscow confident for a new foreign policy adventure to claim the Island of Tuzla and the Kerch Strait. To solve the problem, Vladimir Putin and Leonid Kuchma signed in Kerch “Agreement between Ukraine and the Russian Federation on cooperation in the use of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait”, which stated that both Russian and Ukrainian ships enjoy freedom of navigation, but Tuzla status was fully undetermined and it was decided that “disputes between the Parties concerning the interpretation and application of this Agreement shall be settled through consultations and negotiations, as well as by other peaceful means.” Nevertheless, the dam construction stopped²³.

With that adventure lackluster, Moscow returned to using “gas debts” as a foreign policy argument, which exemplified itself during the well-known “gas wars” of Putin’s Russia with President Viktor Yushchenko’s administration in Ukraine. Yet, despite Muscovite media troubles over Yushchenko “leading Ukraine astray”, this era did not stop any economic cooperation treaties, or declarations of friendship on an official level. However, Moscow’s playbook on influencing Ukrainian decision-making was running short, as they already had bad experience with huge expectations from a “pro-Russian candidate” back with going from Kravchuk to Kuchma. So the probing of Ukraine and the new realities of international relations as a whole continued with the 2008 Russian invasion into Georgia. Ukraine did not stop, but intensified arms sales to Georgia, without changing its attitude towards the unrecognized republics supported by Russia in Georgia. President Yushchenko has expressed support for Georgia in the media, and Medvedev has asked “not to indicate” how to the Russian Black Sea Fleet should behave in response to Ukraine’s objection to return to Sevastopol ships involved in the conflict with Georgia²⁴.

¹⁹ Выжutowич В. С. Бабуриh: «Либо Украина вновь воссоединится с Россией – либо война». *Известия*. Москва, 1992, 122 (23696).

²⁰ Стратегический курс России с государствами – участниками Содружества Независимых Государств URL: <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/9013448/titles/6560Ю>

²¹ Всеукраинские ведомости, 31 жовтня 1995 р., С. 1.

²² Заявление Совета Федерации Федерального Собрания РФ от 5 декабря 1996 г. N 405-СФ «О статусе города Севастополя». *Pravoteka*. URL: <http://www.pravoteka.ru/pst/42/20743.html>

²³ Договір між Україною і Російською Федерацією про співробітництво у використанні Азовського моря і Керченської протоки. *Законодавство України*. URL: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/643_205#Text

²⁴ Російські кораблі, які воювали проти Грузії, повертаються до Севастополя за новими правилами. *Радіо Свобода*. 19 серпня 2008. URL: <http://www.radiosvoboda.org/content/article/1192230.html>

President Yushchenko's decision to support Georgia and stop Russian ships from coming back to Sevastopol caused diplomatic tension. The new crisis in Ukrainian-Russian relations was marked not only by a new round of anti-Ukrainian propaganda in the Russian media and demonstrative cultivation of the supposed "anti-Russian sides of Ukrainian history" in Ukraine, but also by officially declaring this as something deserving of a crisis at the highest level. Catching "heat" for the invasion into Georgia, Moscow had to take a pause before any direct actions against Ukraine. However, now was the time for official ideological preparation for the future war that could not be masked as "fringe politician's thoughts." Of course, there was still some efforts at masquerade: instead of Putin, a Prime Minister at the time, the role of the anti-Ukrainian hawk was handed to his close ally and "presidential post holder" Medvedev. On August 11, 2009, a controversial "Address by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko" was published. Medvedev expressed "deep concern over the current, without exaggeration, crisis in Russian-Ukrainian relations." According to him: "Ukraine's anti-Russian position in connection with Saakashvili's barbaric attack on South Ossetia has caused a negative public response. A year after those tragic events, the question of the fact that civilians and Russian peacekeepers in Tskhinvali were killed with Ukrainian weapons becomes acute again. Those in Kyiv who supplied weapons to the Georgian army and, by the way, do not intend to stop doing so now, fully share the responsibility for the crimes committed with Tbilisi." In addition to the conflict in Tskhinvali region, Medvedev accused the Ukrainian leadership of "stubbornly continuing the course of joining NATO... having the impression that Kyiv has consistently sought to sever existing economic ties with Russia, especially in the energy sector – practically nothing has been done to stop the violation of property rights of Russian investors in Ukraine." Reiterating unofficial assessments of the Russian media, previously not formally related to the official Kremlin's policy, Medvedev criticized "revising the common history, glorifying Nazi minions, glorifying the role of radical nationalists, and imposing nationalist tracts of history on the international community, calling the famine in the USSR in 1932–1933 genocide of the Ukrainian people. The Russian language continues to be ousted from public life, science, education, culture, the media, the judiciary, the interference of the Ukrainian authorities in the affairs of the Orthodox Church, and the demand to recall two of our diplomatic representatives from Ukraine without any grounds". In his statement, Medvedev also informed about his decision to postpone the sending of a new ambassador to Ukraine and in fact expressed complete dissatisfaction with then-current Ukrainian authorities, expressing hope that "the new political leadership of

Ukraine will be ready to build relations between our countries and peoples, in the interests of strengthening European security"²⁵. As one can see, Medvedev officially outlined all the ideological grounds for Putin's 2014 invasion.

Viktor Yanukovich, at the time the opposition leader, was the first politician in Ukraine to react to Dmitry Medvedev's accusations. His response, however, was something that Moscow could look forward to: "The first thing we will do when we come to power is to restore normal, good-neighborly, equal and mutually beneficial relations with our strategic partner, Russia."²⁶ While the "equality" part was of little interest to Moscow (leading to critique of Yanukovich's talks on European Integration, before the abrupt end in autumn 2013), in general, Yanukovich's pro-Russian position and his eventual victory in the presidential elections solidified Russian preparations for war: the more placating the response to threats, the more confidence was there in Moscow for further military adventures.

Conclusions. While confirming a number of conclusions from previous researches (such as I. Artiomov's point about Moscow's "probing" of Ukraine's capabilities with the Crimean issue, or, rather, issues as we can see from the variety of those, relating to local and regional control, Black Sea Fleet status, territorial waters and demarcation) we should also note the reasons for said "probing" being restrained (by Yeltsin's presidential administration itself) in the early 1990s: reliance on Ukrainian food products, lack of confidence in Russian military, expectation of possible nuclear war. The latter fear shows that the idea that Ukraine could not possibly use the nuclear arsenal on its territory, that is often postulated today by journalists and experts, was not considered by Moscow – in fact, they expected Ukraine to somehow use those nukes on its own. As such, the first stages of preparation for war with Ukraine were geopolitical: neutralizing Ukraine's potential nuclear capabilities, dividing the Black Sea Fleet in such a way that Ukraine gets a smaller share, capturing most of the leftover USSR assets (including the gold and diamond reserves) for Moscow. On the ideological front, we note attempts to worsen public opinion on Ukraine in the media, along with eager threats by members of both the Yeltsin administration and top members of the Russian Parliament. However, those were offset by Yeltsin himself distancing himself from such threats, only using their implications when required for another "probe" (such as the "status of Sevastopol", regarding which Russia already backtracked in 1993 during the UN Security Council meeting, yet

²⁵ Послание Президенту Украины Виктору Ющенко. *Кремль*. URL: <http://news.kremlin.ru/news/5158>

²⁶ Заява Медведєва: дипломатична війна чи «подарунок Ющенку»? *BBC*. 11 серпня 2009 р. URL: https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/domestic/story/2009/08/090811_russiaukraine_dorosh_ob.

was “reminded” again way into Yeltsin’s negotiations with Kuchma’s administration).

The ideological framework used as grounds for invasion, ranging from the issues of “Ukraine’s anti-Russian history” to “problems for the Russian language” was not officialized until Dmitry Medvedev’s 2009 address. Once again, the temporary figurehead Medvedev was used as a proxy for the de-facto leader Putin to evade personally threatening Ukraine until 2014. This tactic of the Russian Federation leadership, from Yeltsin to Putin, allowed researchers to separate “Official Russia” from “nationalist propaganda” in their analyses. Meanwhile, Moscow concentrated on securing the preparations for war: geopolitically, it needed a nuke-free Ukraine with a weakened army and a government figurehead ready to placate the aggressor when faced with threats, while ideologically it had to shape public opinion against Ukraine on an official level, while keeping the top leadership’s hands clean. In all cases where previous “probing” was resisted (such as the Tuzla crisis, or the 1990–1991 negotiations) Moscow backtracked and set their plans of expansion back for years, and the issue of leadership in Ukraine was crucial for their plans – the invasion started

under the “placating” Yanukovych (February 20, 2014) and went into full throttle with his escape from Ukraine, under a provisional government.

This presents us with a recommendation, and a lesson of history for the current Zelensky administration: negotiating to placate Moscow, to tell them that some parts of Ukrainian territorial integrity (such as Crimea and occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions) could be a negotiable issue is to invite further attempts of “adventure”. For Moscow, a strong diplomatic position means that, likely, the side holding that position has something hidden to fight against Moscow (like the 1990–1991 expectation of Ukraine’s nuclear response), while offers to compromise are read as invitations for more illegal actions, or at least diplomatic and economic pressure (as seen during the Black Sea Fleet talks). Additionally, we see, Moscow is not ready to attack another target too soon after a previous “adventure”, as seen with the 2008–2009 situation, when it took Medvedev time until next year to even diplomatically attack Yushchenko’s administration, when war on Georgia was over already, and the eventual invasion happened only in 2014, under a “not our troops” premise.

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