

Assessing Ukraine's future thirty years after its independence

Ukraine recently marked the thirtieth anniversary of its independence. Oleg Chupryna argues that if Ukraine is to continue to survive as an independent state, it will need strong support from the West in its relations with Russia.

On 24 August, Ukraine celebrated its thirtieth anniversary of independence from the USSR, the modern incarnation of the centuries-old Russian Empire. Some may argue that Ukraine achieved its independence accidentally due to a perfect storm created by several unfortunate events which contributed to the Soviet Empire's collapse – like one of Nassim Taleb's famous '[black swan](#)' moments. At first glance, such an explanation seems plausible, but the reality is more complex.

Origins and identity

The origins of today's Ukraine can be found in *Rus'*, the first polity which existed on its territory in early medieval times. However, from the 13th century through the 20th century, the people of Ukraine did not have their own state and were divided amongst various polities. For centuries, Ukrainians lived in different empires and states, experiencing a variety of political, religious and cultural influences. The major cultural difference that Ukraine experiences today is between Ukrainians from the west and centre and those from the east and south of the country. For over three centuries, the eastern and southern Ukraine was dominated by despotic tsarist Russia. For most of this period, the Ukrainian language and identity were either oppressed or ridiculed.

Meanwhile, the western parts of the country developed within various more liberal European polities, such as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Habsburg Empire, amongst others, with their institutions of private ownership, Magdeburg rights, the autonomy of churches, and so forth. In particular, a legendary Cossack semi-state, *Zaporizhian Sich*, which existed from the mid-sixteenth century through the end of the eighteenth century, had a powerful influence on the formation of the national identity and political culture of Ukrainians.

For a few centuries, this Ukrainian Cossack self-rule was based on the strong tradition of democratic governance, with elected officials accountable to the assembly of the Cossacks. After the collapse of the Russian Empire, the short period of existence of an independent democratic Ukrainian state (the Ukrainian People's Republic) between 1918 and 1921 was a significant episode that further influenced the formation of a national identity and political culture for Ukraine's people.

The fight for freedom and national independence during this period and then subsequently the struggle led by Ukraine's Insurgency Army (UPA) during and after the Second World War made a substantial contribution towards constructing the narratives of Ukraine's national mythology. The self-representation to emerge from this period views Ukrainians as a free-spirited, brave and rebellious people suffering from centuries of external oppression and fighting for their freedom and independence.

Ukraine and Russia

In the decades preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukrainian nationalists formed arguably the most numerous and active part of the Soviet dissident movement. This is evident in the accounts of the well-known Jewish Ukrainian human rights activist and dissident medical doctor Semen Gluzman, who spent seven years in the Soviet labour camps and three years in Siberian exile in the 1970s and 1980s. He claims that Ukrainian dissidents of different ethnic backgrounds, including the nationalists, were disproportionately represented among imprisoned Soviet dissidents and that anti-Soviet political, human rights and civic activities in Soviet Ukraine were thus among the most pronounced in the whole of the USSR.

However, this is just half of the story. Ukrainians also helped to build and develop the empires in which they lived, much like the Scots in the British Empire. Indeed, even the basic idea of the Russian Empire traces its origins to an Orthodox theologian and philosopher of Ukrainian origin, Theofan Prokopovich. In the early 1700s, he laid the ideological foundations of the Russian Orthodox Empire and was the mastermind of the reforms executed by the Moscovite Tsar Peter I.

From this point on, the natives of Ukraine played an important role in both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Moreover, Ukrainians were disproportionately represented in Russian science, higher education and Russia's military command. However, this came with a cost as a successful career was only possible if they renounced their ethnic identity and became fully Russian.

Will Ukraine survive another thirty years?

It is little wonder given the historical context that in [a recent article](#), as has occurred many times before, Russian President Vladimir Putin argues that Russians and Ukrainians are the same people. For Putin, an independent Ukraine is historical nonsense – a concept artificially created by the West to divide and weaken historical Russia.

It does not matter whether he genuinely believes in these statements or if they amount to a simple propaganda stunt. One thing is clear, as long as Putin is in power, he will never leave Ukraine alone. He will use all available means to subjugate or even incorporate Ukraine fully. But whether the Kremlin will continue with Putin's hybrid warfare strategy or instead use a full-scale military offensive depends on the wider context.

Putin, a skilled and pragmatic politician, will not gamble with luck, and will only act if he is confident about a positive outcome. If he believes that Ukraine will not resist or the West will not come to assist Ukraine, then a full-scale military offensive could be on the table. Ukraine's leadership and people are aware they must therefore be ready to fight for their statehood, and the West is obliged to make it clear to the Kremlin that Ukraine will get full support and that Russia will suffer from international isolation and economic sanctions if it takes military action.

Without such assurance, the West may have to prepare for the flight of millions of refugees from Ukraine, and potentially the collapse of the European and international security system as we know it. It has been 13 years since Russia's war against Georgia in 2008, and over seven years since the annexation of Crimea and its proxy intervention in the Donbass. It has been more than enough time for the collective West to learn that the Kremlin is ready to use military force when it is confident it can do so with impunity.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Tina Hartung](#) on [Unsplash](#)
