



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# Historical Evolution of Ukraine and its Post-Communist Challenges

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### Abstract:

The current borders of Ukraine arose during the Soviet ruling of the country, different regions were incorporated into their territory from the 20s to the 50s of the last century due to the annexations and territorial transfers, that were made by the different leaders of Moscow. Thus, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine achieved independence with a territorial extension that reaches all regions inhabited mostly by ethnically Ukrainian population.

At the moment of independence most of its citizens put their regional problems aside to show themselves as a united country and so that Ukraine achieves international recognition as a new independent State. However, as time goes by the disagreements have resurfaced, which shows that these tensions continued existing although they seemed hidden for years.

We need to keep in mind that to understand all these issues it is necessary to analyze how the historical evolution of the Ukrainian territory has been, yet it is not only about climatic differences or economic issues. For this reason, this paper aims to study the differences that have historically existed in Ukraine. These differences were caused by territories that once were part of other powers and now are integrated in Ukraine and by the influences received by external actors. It should be considered that most of the current conflicts come from there.

Therefore, this contribution intends to show how, from the historical formation of the Ukrainian territory, the conflicts are taking place in the Slavic country. To carry out this study we will focus on a historical reconstruction of the national question.

**Keywords:** *Ukraine; Historical evolution; Soviet Union; Independence; Post-communist conflicts*

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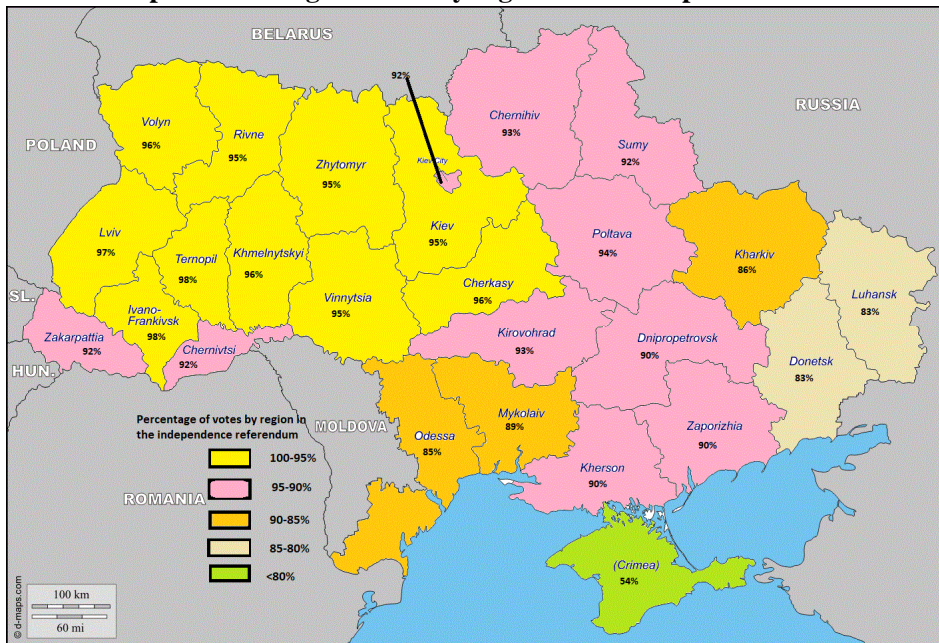
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# Historical Evolution of Ukraine and its Post-Communist Challenges

## 1. Introduction

The current situation of Ukraine at present is very hazardous, as it is seeing its territory disintegrating. However, at the beginning of the 90s of the last century the contrasts between the different regions of the Ukraine were left aside. All of this was due to achieve a fundamental objective for this territory. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine became independent after a referendum in which 90% of its population voted supporting the independence (Rupérez, 1994:137).

**Map 1. Percentage of votes by region in the independence referendum**



**Source:** author's own elaboration

This was undoubtedly the event with the greatest consensus among the Ukrainian population as a whole. Ukraine's formation as an independent state, however, did not reduce the great differences that still existed and exist between the regions that are part of the country. It is necessary to delve into the history of Ukraine in order to understand these inequalities.

For most of its history, Ukraine has been part of different empires that have struggled to control their territories. Only during the period known as Kievan Rus did the principalities become independent. Nevertheless, the invasion of the Mongolian Empire in the 13th century subjected Ukraine under a new control (Nicolle and Shpakovsky, 2011: 13). From that moment on, its different regions formed part other regional powers.

Map 2. Extension of Kievan Rus –in the early to mid-11th century–



Source: Encyclopædia Britannica

The original territory of Ukraine was annexed to Russia by Czar Alexis I in 1654 due to the Treaty of Pereyaslav (Lukowski and Zawadzki, 2002a: 93). However, it was not until 1667, with the Treaty of Andrusovo that the effective distribution of Ukrainian land between the Polish-Lithuanians and the Russians took place. By this agreement the left bank of the Dnieper River would be included in Russian territory and the right bank would become part of the Polish-Lithuanian side. From this moment there was a great Russification of these Ukrainian territory, losing part of its essential identity signs (Cucó, 1999: 262).

In the final decades of the 18th century the borders of Ukraine and the Black Sea were secured by Russia. In this process Crimean Peninsula was incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1783, when it was taken over from the Ottomans. During the years 1772, 1793, and 1795, Poland was divided. Due to this fact the western part of Poland, that was previous part of Ukraine before, was divided between the powers of the time: Russia and Austria.

With a Ukrainian territory fractured between different empires, we reach the 19th century, a period in which nationalism began to emerge with force. As a result, the division of Ukraine marked the different evolution between the eastern and western parts. The Ukrainian national awakening in the eastern part of the country, belonging to the Russian Empire, was linked to the obstacles of using the Ukrainian language and of sharing their own history addressed by Tsarist control. In the west, this national awakening was related to the existence of the Greek-Catholic Church and the coexistence with the Polish

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population. However, it would not be until after the 1905 Revolution and, above all, since the 1917 Revolution that Ukrainian nationalism had transcendence (Zapater Espí, 2002: 343).

### 2. Ukraine under the Soviet Government

#### 2.1. From the First World War to the origin of the USSR

Due to the February Revolution of 1917 and the fall of Tsarism, there was a rise of nationalism in the territories that belonged to the Russian Empire. In words of E.J. Hobsbawm: "*among activists of oppressed nationalities, such as Polish and Ukrainians, the event gave rise to hopes for reform, perhaps even independence*" (Hobsbawm, 1991: 137).

Only a few days later, in March, a Ukrainian Central Council 'Rada' was established in Kiev. Thus, on 13 June 1917, the Provisional Government of Petrograd proclaimed an 'Autonomous Ukrainian Republic' (Carr, 1985: 310), with which the central government attempted to curb the Ukrainian nationalist boom, even though it had only some administrative functions.

Due to the bad relations between the Ukrainian 'Rada' and the Moscow governments, the independent movement was intensified after the October Revolution of 1917. On 20 November the 'Rada' proclaimed the People's Republic of Ukraine, and after it, the soviets increased their presence on Ukrainian territory that had belonged to the Russian Empire. In the city of Kharkov and with the support of the main industrial centers in the eastern part of the country, they established the Socialist Republic of Ukraine at the end of December 1917.

Faced with this situation, the Republic of Ukraine was proclaimed an 'independent, free and sovereign state of the Ukrainian people' in Kiev of January 1918. Some weeks later, the confrontation between the two governments established in Ukraine was developed and resulted in the rapid Soviet occupation of the country.

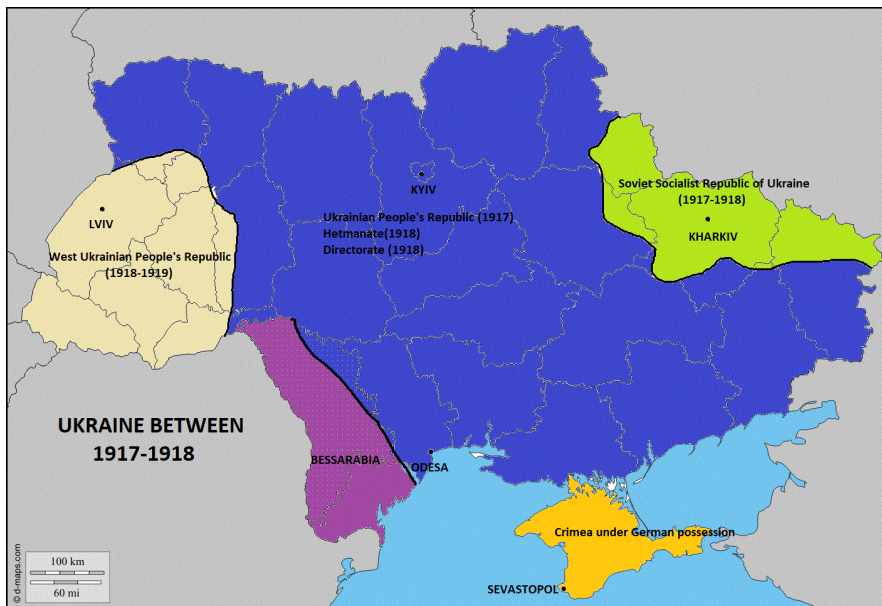
On 9 February there was a radical turnaround in the outlook, when Ukraine signed a separate peace treaty with the Central Empires in Brest-Litovsk in order to get their aid against the Soviets. With German assistance and the signing of peace on 3 March with the Bolsheviks, the controlled territories in Ukraine were returned to the People's Republic.

The country was occupied by the Germans according to the Ukrainian 'Rada' for the aid received earlier. There the German rule imposed a regime of terror, dissolving the 'Rada' in April 1918 and proclaiming the Hetmanate (Bruhat, 1977a: 39). However, after the defeat of the Germans in First World War, the power they had created disappeared with them, giving way to the period known as the Directorate since December 1918.

As for the western part of Ukraine, it was controlled by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but after the beginning of the disintegration of the Empire, the National Council of Ukraine was formed of October 1918 in Lvov. With this institution, the People's Republic of Western Ukraine was created at the end of the same year. But with the birth of Poland as an independent state at the end of the First World War, Poland wanted to gain control of the newly created Republic. And consequently, a few months after its creation, the Polish destroyed the Western Ukrainian Republic and occupied Galitzia (Lukowski and Zawadzki, 2002b: 216).



Map 3. Ukraine between 1917-1918



Source: author's own elaboration

For their part, the Ukrainian Bolsheviks re-entered in Ukraine of May 1918, starting the civil war on Ukrainian territory. By the end of 1919 they had recovered the ceded territory following the Brest-Litovsk Peace: The Red Army's victories in the Russian Civil War and the reconquest of Ukraine were seen in Poland as a direct threat to the country (Bogdan, 1991:174). Therefore, after a series of confrontations between Russians and Polish, borders were established. On 12 October 1920 the Treaty of Riga was signed, which would be confirmed on 18 March 1921: the border was established to the east of the Curzon line and Poland incorporates Galitzia (Bruhat, 1977b: 44).

After this war, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic became one of the founders of the Soviet Union by signing the USSR's Treaty of Establishment on 22 December 1922. Thus, by mandate of Lenin the eastern part of current Ukraine became part of the Socialist Republic, and even the capital was for a few years Kharkov 'in 1934 it will be installed again in Kiev' while the western part continued to be part of Poland.

As for Crimea, it was under German rule during the war. But already below the Soviet regime, it became the Autonomous Crimean Soviet Socialist Republic integrated into the Russian Soviet Socialist Federal Republic from 1921 to 1941 (Kurz Muñoz, 1992: 177).

## 2.2. The interwar period in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic

During the first years of Soviet government the so-called New Economic Policy was developed. Within which the Slavic country took place 'Ukrainianization' in diverse cultural, political and economic spheres. The 20s of the last century were a decisive stage for all these soviet countries because of the configuration of their national consciousness

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took place (Taibo, 1993: 17). However, this policy consisted only of a strategy of Moscow's central power to ensure that Sovietization would reach all parts of Ukraine through its own means. But it must be also considered that this willingness of the Soviet Government is at odds with the transfers of the Russian population that arrived in Ukraine between 1921 and 1922.

After Lenin's death in 1924 a new period marked by Stalin's accession to power began, which in the following years slowed down this 'Ukrainianization'. The relative consent of the Ukrainian people led to the formation of certain national groups.

Several imaginary anti-Soviet organisations were 'discovered' starting with the Ukrainian Liberation Union in July 1929 (Service, 2000: 195). Opposition to Ukrainian nationalism and to everything related to Ukrainian culture and history hardened from 1928 onwards. It was from this year that two important policies were implemented in the USSR, on the one hand, the collectivisation of farms and on the other, the First Five-Year Plan for the industry.

The forced collectivisation of the Ukrainian countryside began in the early 30s. Although the situation became more unsustainable from 1931 onwards, when the state confiscated cereals on a massive scale. Thus, causing one of the most dramatic and darkest periods in Ukrainian history between the years 1932-1933 called Holodomor, the Great Famine –for more information look for: Conquest, Robert., 1986. *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet collectivization and the Terror-Famine*, Nueva York: Oxford University–. Despite numerous studies published, it is very difficult to give a number of victims because Stalin's regime was responsible for hiding the real situation in Ukraine for a long time.

But in the 30s there were even more disasters for the Ukrainian population, as the Great Purge occurred from 1934 to 1938. The elites of the Ukrainian population were purified, either by directly killing them or by being deported to Siberia. What is demonstrated is that these facts served to foment fear among the inhabitants of the country, putting an end to any pro-Ukrainian movement. This is related to Ukraine's SSR.

Regarding the situation in the Ukrainian part of the country belonging to Poland the persecution of its inhabitants, was intensified. Such as the persecution of the Ukrainian language or the Greek-Catholic church in the area, which will be of vital importance for later events.

Already at the end of this decade and with Hitler's rise to power, Nazi Germany and the Soviets were preparing for an imminent war, which will be key to Ukraine's territory.

### **2.3. From the Second World War to the end of the communist period**

After the invasion of Poland by Germany in September 1939 and the signature of the Secret Pact between Molotov and Ribbentrop, the Soviet Union annexed the Ukrainian part that had been part of Poland until then. In June 1941, however, the Nazis broke the Polish Pact division by invading the territory that belonged to the Soviets. In this way the German-Soviet War would begin, which would not end until 1945, and which would have important consequences for Ukraine.

The Germans' plan was to defeat the Soviet Union and the first step in achieving that objective was to control Ukrainian territory. In this way, the Third Reich would ensure control of important mineral, industrial and agricultural resources –the industrial zones of Leningrad, the Donetsk basin, the plains of Ukraine– and would directly hit the centre of Soviet power (Núñez Seixas, 2007: 33).

At first the Ukrainians saw the Germans as liberators from the Soviet yoke, but nothing beyond reality. In Soviet Ukraine, Germany established a brutal occupation zone, the Reichskommissariat Ukraine –1941-1944–, where Ukrainians were treated as subhuman individuals and their agricultural products used as resources for the Reich (Snyder, 2014: 267).

After the victory of the Soviets at the Battle of Stalingrad in February 1943, the Germans retreated, and Red Army managed to enter Ukraine again and reconquer the lost territory. Thus, Kharkov fell back into Soviet hands in August 1943, Kiev in November 1943, and Lvov in July 1944.

At the end of the war the USSR annexed in 1945 the former Ukrainian territories of Galitzia, Volinia, Subcarpathian Ruthenia, Bessarabia and Bukovina. (López-Davalillo Larrea, 2001: 261). Thus, most of the regions of the independent state of Ukraine that emerged in 1991 were united with the exception of Crimea. A topic that will be discussed later.

The most drastic change was that experienced by the population of the new Soviet incorporations, that is, the western part of Ukraine. As soon as the war was over, Stalinist politics set out to repress all attempts at nationalism, especially regarding the Ukrainian language and the Greek-Catholic church. During the years 1946-1948 there were huge population transfers on the Ukrainian-Polish SSR border. In the part that had already been part of the USSR the situation was different as they were still afraid of the events of the 30s.

The differences between the two sides were already considerable, due to the relative tolerance of the Habsburgs. That allowed Ukrainians in Galitzia to preserve their language. In 1944, depending on the districts, between 78% and 91% had it as their first language, while in the territories once ruled by the Tsar, even those who considered themselves Ukrainians often spoke Russian easily (Judt, 2006: 903).

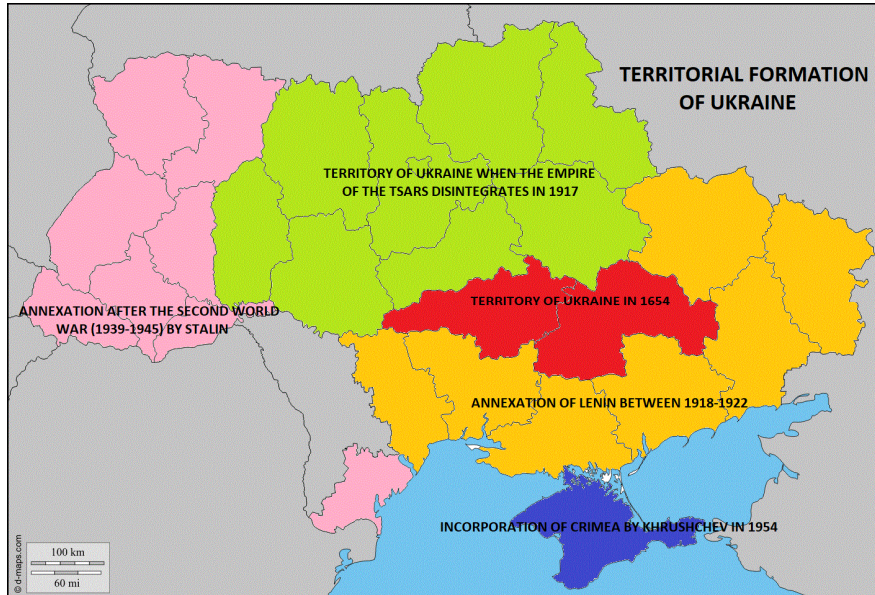
To complete the territorial formation of Ukraine we must go until the year 1954, when Crimea was incorporated into the territory of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. During Second World War the Peninsula was not spared from German occupation, which lasted from October 1941 to April 1944. After the Soviet invasion and the end of the war, Crimean population was treated by the Stalin government as a collaborator with the Germans. But this accusation had no other objective than the mass deportation of the indigenous Tatars population in order to repopulate the region with Russian inhabitants. Thus, in 1946 Crimea lost its status as an autonomous republic and became a mere province of Russia (Sellier and Sellier, 2006: 78). With Stalin's death and Khrushchev's rise to power in 1953, the situation in Ukraine improved compared to earlier times. The Republic was favoured by the policy pursued by the new leader in addressing the problem of non-Russian nations in the Soviet Union. In fact, to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the Treaty of Pereyaslav in 1654, Ukraine received the Crimean Peninsula as a 'gift'. There are three fundamental aspects that must be considered:

- Firstly, the symbolic use of the Treaty of Pereyaslav, since for the Russian people it is the union of Ukraine with the Tsarist Empire, while for the Ukrainian nationalists it symbolises their independence.
- Secondly, as we have already pointed out, after the deportations of the indigenous –Tatars– Crimean population, most of it was populated by Russians. Due to the population transfer carried out by the central Soviet governments, the number of the Russian population in Ukraine's SSR demographic data has increased.

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- Thirdly and finally, we must talk about an indirect consequence: in transferring the moral problem of these deportations carried out by Stalin to the Ukrainian government.

### Map 4. Territorial formation of Ukraine



Source: author's own elaboration

For the rest of the Soviet era, Ukrainians were not a major problem for Moscow's leaders, as they were in other parts of the Soviet Union. There were simply a few isolated events of rebellion or the exaltation of nationalism during the Brezhnev period. In fact, it will be one of the Republics where nationalist and independence ideas developed later during the time of Gorbachev's Perestroika.

### 2.4. From Perestroika to independent Ukraine

The beginning of the end of the Soviet world began with the accession to power of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985. Without a doubt the key moment was the beginning of the policy known as Perestroika. To our effect this policy helped to experience a rapid expansion of nationalist ideas by the republics of the USSR. However, in Ukraine, as in the other Slavic republics this feeling appeared later –1990-1991–. But there were a number of facts that paved the way for the final events:

- The Chernobyl accident in 1986. After this serious disaster the population began to highlight the policies carried out by Moscow in the past.
- Mining strikes. In July 1989, a strike by the Western Siberian coal miners in Kurznetsk broke out. Shortly thereafter, their colleagues in Donetsk, Ukraine, joined the strike (García Higuera, 2015: 108).
- The creation of the National Front. In December 1989, the Popular Front for Perestroika –RUKH– was born in Kiev and immediately formulated a programme and statutes (Carrière D'encausse, 1991: 194). After its implementation, the main difficulty lies in bringing the two parts of Ukraine closer together.

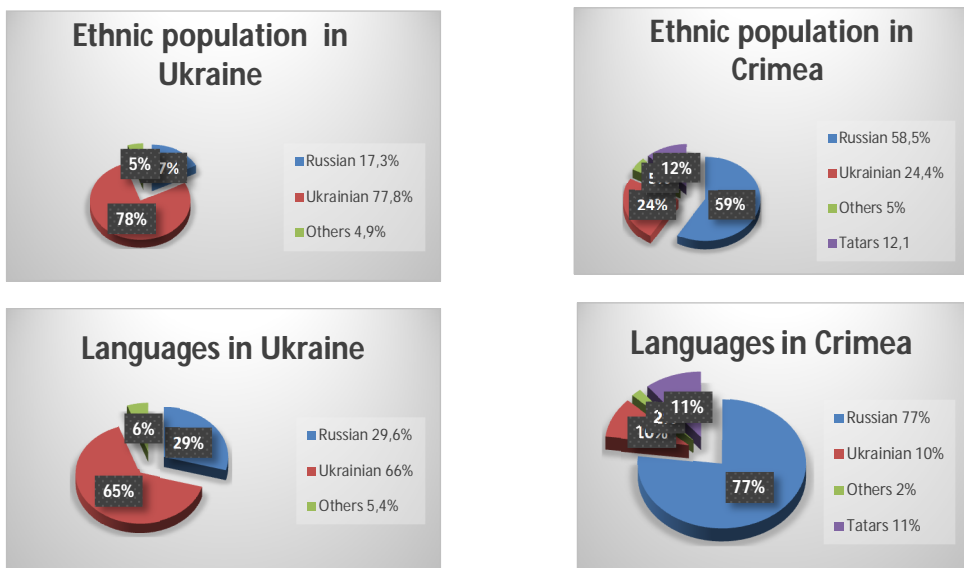


From that moment onwards, events were accelerated, as in July 1990 Ukraine's sovereignty was announced and on 24 August 1991 independence was proclaimed. The referendum took place on 1 December of the same year, in which the whole population gave their approval to independence. The Ukrainian people freely expressed their will in the referendum on independence. The world recognized Ukraine, even though Gorbachev repeatedly warned that it would be a 'catastrophe' if the 'union' was broken (Martín de la Guardia and Pérez Sánchez, 1995: 341).

### 3. The challenges of the post-communist Ukraine

The arrival of independence did not mean that Ukraine began an easy path alone. In fact, from the first moment it will encounter serious difficulties and all of them inherited from its time as a member of the USSR. These include the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States –CIS–, the location of the Black Sea Fleet and the treatment of Soviet-era nuclear weapons. There are undoubtedly two conflicts still going on in the Slavic country: the first is the situation in the Crimea and the second is the secessionist movement in the east. In addition to this, there are large differences in votes in the various presidential elections between the Ukrainian regions. On the one hand, the candidates most prone to relations with Russia –Kuchma, Yanukovych– won in the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine. On the other hand, if the candidates were more favourable to relations with the European Union –Yuschenko, Poroshenko– they received more support in the central and western part of the country: the struggle of forces that will have serious consequences among the country's population. Due to this difference in vote in the elections to be held in Ukraine it can be seen that the differences between the east and west of the country continue despite the formation of the country as an independent state. This situation has become evident in the two conflicts that will be seen below. When talking about Crimean Peninsula, it must be highlighted that the majority of its population is ethnic Russians, due to the transfer of population following the deportations of the native population. During 1991 the Crimean Tatars were able to return to their historical homeland, although they only represent 12% of the total population.

**Chart 1. Ethnic population and languages in Ukraine and Crimea 2001**



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Source: author's own elaboration from the 2001 Ukrainian Census

Since Ukraine's independence Russia announced that the cession of the Crimea to the country should be reviewed. This fact served the separatists of the Peninsula to organize a referendum in favour of independence. To ease the tension, Ukraine restored the status of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea in 1991, which was ratified in 1992. However, in the same year, the Parliament of the region proclaimed its independence and formulated a secessionist constitution. The Ukrainian 'Rada' struck a blow that same year, returning to the Constitution of Ukraine.

When relations between the two sides appeared to be calm, 1994 saw a return to criminal separatism with a new declaration of independence. In 1995, however, the situation changed again, with the adoption of a new constitution stating that Crimea belonged to Ukraine; this fact must be seen in conjunction with the presidential elections held in 1994. The election of the new president Leonid Kuchma, a more pro-Russian president, appeased the Crimea's claims.

It was not until 2014 that the question of the Crimea reappears in the international media. Following President Yanukovich's refusal to sign an association agreement with the European Union in November 2013, the Ukrainian population occupied the streets in the form of a protest, known as Euromaidan. These concentrations occur mainly in the western part of the country and had its antecedent in the Orange Revolution that took place between 2004 and 2005, opening old wounds. After a few months –December 2013 to January 2014– of serious confrontations between the demonstrators and the forces of law and order, the situation reached its peak.

Following the departure of Yanukovich from the country in February 2014, some areas rebelled when an interim Government was established in Ukraine. Putin's government hastened to incite certain pro-Russian regions to insurgency, with the intention of reviving the old ghosts of independence. Everything suggested that the formation of the new Ukrainian government would come closer to the policies of association with the European Union as called for by the Euromaidan demonstrators. These incitements were more far-reaching: on 11 March 2014, the declaration of independence of the Crimea took place, which became official after the referendum on 16 March 2014. In which almost 97% of the Crimean population voted in favour of unification with Russia (García Andrés, González Martín & Martín de la Guardia, 2017: 117). Thus, two days later Crimea joined the Russian Federation officially and unilaterally. This was essential for subsequent relations between Russia and Ukraine, and even between Russia and the Western world.

At the same time as in Crimea, incitements by Putin government influenced also other regions of Ukraine such as Kharkov, Lugansk and Donetsk (in the east) and Odessa and Jerson (in the south). The main demands are Ukraine's federalism and an approach to Russian policies. Following the 'success' of the Crimea, in April 2014 two of these territories were proclaimed: Donetsk People's Republic and Lugansk People's Republic. In other cities such as Kharkov and Odessa there were also demonstrations that were stifled by the central government.

Despite the mediation of some international organizations, –the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or the United States– the situation worsened in the rebel areas of Ukraine. Between 17 and 18 April, the Geneva

Agreements took place, which proposed, on the one hand, the disarmament of the pro-Russian armed groups in eastern Ukraine and, on the other; the Ukrainian institutions committed themselves to the elaboration of a Constitution in which federalism of the regions would enter with force. However, the situation did not improve as the rebel groups were not involved in the drafting of the agreement and did not accept it.

In May of the same year the separatists of the Donetsk and Lugansk –Donbass– regions held a referendum for self-determination. According to the organisers, it was a success in terms of the overwhelming majority in favour of consultation and participation. Following the announcement of the ‘new Eastern Republics’, Ukrainian authorities launched an offensive against them in an attempt to stop the uprising. As the armed conflict intensified in form and spread over time, so much so that it continues to exist today. The presidential elections were held in this climate of tension. The Provisional Government had proposed the voting for 25 May –the date of these elections was not chosen at random, as the European Parliament elections took place on the same day in the European Union–. With the victory of the candidate Petro Poroshenko, the tone of the confrontations raised, because his political program was based on a rapprochement towards the European Union. These pro-Russian demonstrations bring to light an idea of separatism that is closely related to the historical evolution of Ukraine: Novorossiia, that is, the region incorporated by Lenin into Ukraine's SSR between 1918 and 1921.

**Map 5. The ‘idea’ of Novorossiia with the territories in conflict**



Source: author's own elaboration

Everything we have seen in this chapter can be summed up in the words of Zbigniew Brzezinski: "*Ukraine, an important new space on the Eurasian board, is a geopolitical pivot because its very existence as an independent country helps to transform Russia. Without Ukraine, Russia is no longer an Eurasian empire*" (Brzezinski, 1998: 54).

#### 4. Conclusion

Simply if we approach to the etymological meaning of Ukraine we can realize its complex formation: ‘border land’. As we have seen throughout the article there is a clear evolutionary difference between Eastern and Western Ukraine. The different divisions of

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the country throughout history and the membership of different empires highlight the current composition of the Slavic state. Undoubtedly, the period that produced the greatest differences between the two zones, is the Soviet period.

We need to remind that eastern Ukraine had been integrated in Russia for a long time, and its religion, language and history were assimilated over time. During the first independence that came in a short period of time before the Soviet era, it served to attract the Ukrainian nationalist feeling. This feeling was contained throughout this period with the repressive policies of the communist leaders.

Western Ukraine was ruled by other powers and its late integration into the Soviet Union made more difficult the assimilation of Russia, though also with more reticence. However, even if it was clandestinely there was always a greater survival of the purely Ukrainian culture in this region.

And what about the Crimea? This region was depopulated from its native Tatars inhabitants by Stalin for his interests on the Black Sea through the arrival of Russian population.

Thus, looking at the historical evolution of the territory of Ukraine, we can understand which the current situation of the country is. So much so that by comparing the area of Ukraine that belonged for centuries to the Russian Empire the so-called Novorossiia, we can see that they include approximately the same areas. That explains the importance that Ukraine currently has for Russia. It is not just a question of cultural or linguistic identities, but behind it all are economic and geopolitical interests. It is therefore necessary to find a solution as soon as possible to one of the most serious post-Soviet conflicts of recent years.

To conclude, the union that the Ukrainians made at first to achieve their independence from the Soviet yoke was only a mirage. In the following years and currently, the post-Soviet inherited problems have only reopened old wounds. Russia's attempts to keep Ukraine under its zone of influence have reopened those old wounds.

It is essential to remember that the success of Ukraine's existence as an independent country was thank to the action of all the inhabitants of the country. All the regions –to a greater or lesser extent– as we have already analyzed in this article voted in favor of independence, which shows that it is possible to achieve understanding between the different areas. The arguments of both sides need to be put on the table in order to find a solution to this major problem.

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