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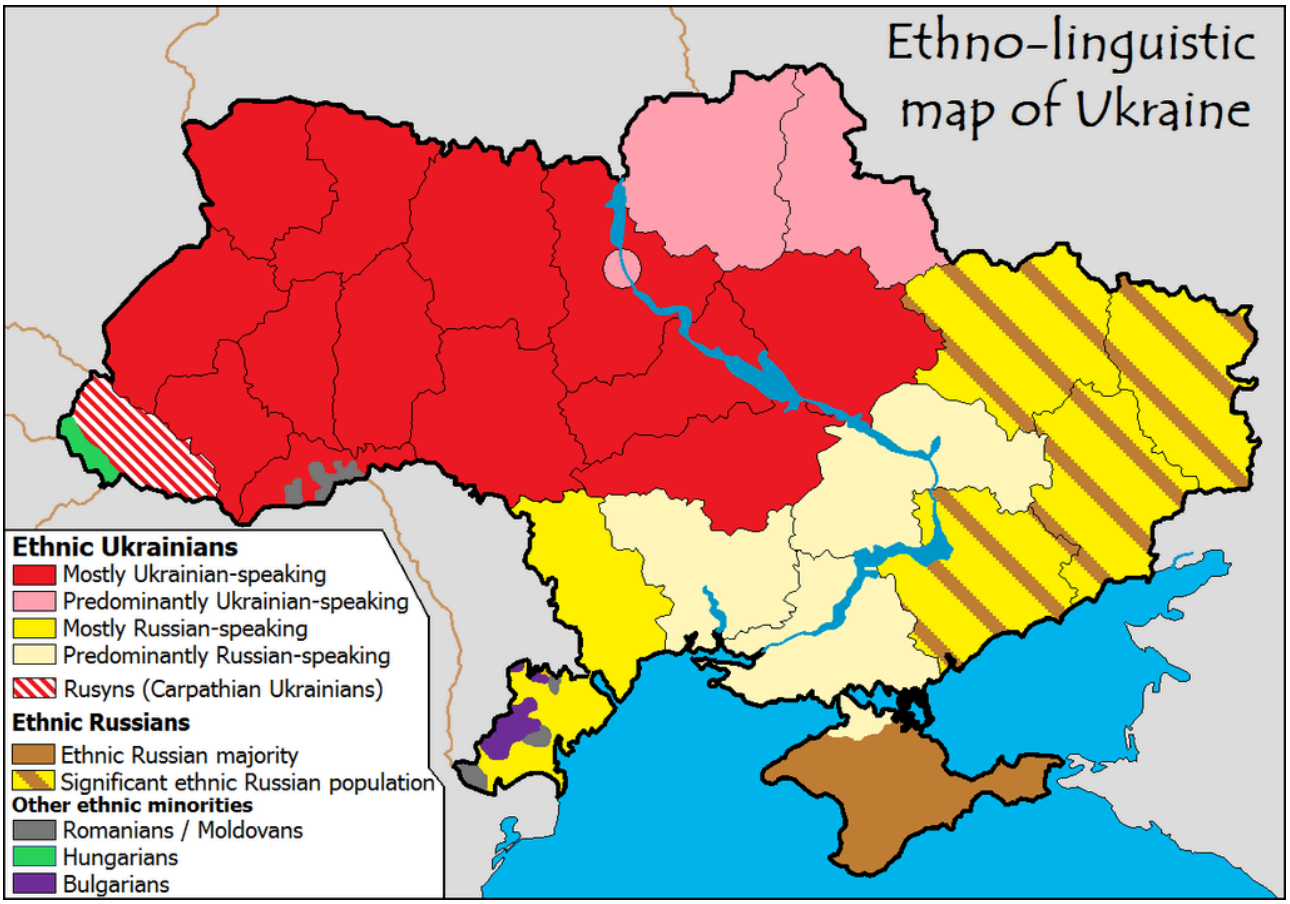
Study Guide

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The Situation in Ukraine

Introduction

The relationship between Ukraine and Russia is currently the most pressing issue on the international stage. The UN Security Council has dealt with it before and is dealing with it right now. In order to understand why the tensions between the two countries came to a head, we should turn to Ukraine's history.



Background Information

In its contemporary form, Ukraine was born in 1991 after it withdrew from the collapsing Soviet Union. However, the area had been inhabited for thousands of years and has been one of the beacons of Slavic presence on the European continent. It fell under the influence of a variety of rulers until becoming part of the Russian Empire in the 18th century. It briefly gained independence in 1917, but it was reabsorbed in the Soviet Union in 1922, of which it was a founding member.

It declared itself independent again in 1991 and confirmed it via a referendum. Since then, its relationship with neighbouring powers has been complex. Ukrainian-speaking regions are increasingly looking to the West and the EU, while many Russian-speaking parts press for closer ties with Russia.

The Orange Revolution

In contemporary times, the main antecedents to the present crisis are to be traced back to the so-called "Orange Revolution," following the presidential elections held in 2004, which came close to causing a civil war. These elections saw the outgoing president of Ukraine supporting the campaign of Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, who also received the support of the Kremlin. The leading candidate of the opposition was Viktor Yushchenko,

who led a campaign against corruption. In the first round of the presidential election, on October 31, Yushchenko and Yanukovych won similar shares of the vote, but in the runoff, Yanukovych was declared the winner. Yushchenko's supporters accused him of fraud and staged mass protests that came to be known as the Orange Revolution. During two weeks of protests, demonstrators wore orange, Yushchenko's campaign colour; at the same time, Yanukovych's supporters in the east threatened to secede from Ukraine if the results were annulled. On December 3, the Supreme Court ruled the election invalid and ordered the runoff be held again on December 26. Yushchenko defeated Yanukovych by winning 52 percent of the vote and was inaugurated on January 23, 2005, although Yanukovych challenged the results. The subsequent years were troubled by political instability and inner conflicts between the President and Yanukovych, who went on to become prime minister later in Yushchenko's presidency.

Yanukovych's Presidency

On January 17, 2010, new elections were held and President Yushchenko received only about 5% of the vote, as most Ukrainians were disappointed in him. On the other hand, Yanukovych garnered 35% of the vote, while Yulia Tymoshenko took a 25% share. Since none of the candidates had won a majority of votes, a runoff was held on February 7. The results were split along regional and ethnic lines: most of Western Ukraine supported Tymoshenko, while most of the East favoured Yanukovych. The latter totalled 48.95% of the votes against Tymoshenko's 45.47%.

In April 2010, after a long parliamentary debate, Ukraine agreed to extend Russia's lease of Sevastopol's port, originally set to expire in 2017, to 2042. In exchange, Russia would guarantee lower gas prices to Ukraine. Yanukovych's government further pivoted towards Russia in June, when it abandoned its stated goal of joining NATO. At the time, EU leaders voiced concerns on the state of the rule of law in Ukraine.

The Maidan Revolution and Crimea

In November 2013, an internal crisis took place, which soon afterwards led to the so-called Maidan Revolution (or Euromaidan).

The crisis was set off by Yanukovych backtracking on a deal for greater integration with the EU (the "association agreement") at the Vilnius Summit. It sparked mass protests and riots in Kyiv's Independence square, known as Maidan, which were violently repressed. A central demand of protesters was greater integration with the EU, hence the name Euromaidan.

Russia supported Yanukovych, but in February 2014, he was ousted and forced to flee the country. A month later, Russian forces entered Crimea, which had always benefited from special autonomy and hosted Russian military bases. They annexed the peninsula after a rapidly held referendum, which the international community never recognised.

Fighting broke out in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, which claimed their independence, while in the western regions, local governments were replaced by nationalist forces. The Russian government claimed that neo-Nazi forces had taken power in Kyiv and it was necessary to respond.

Minsk Agreement

A key factor in the Ukrainian crisis is of course the Minsk Agreement. In September 2014, Ukraine, Russia, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the pro-Russian separatist leaders signed the first Minks Protocol. They agreed to a ceasefire and prisoner exchanges, but violations were frequent on both sides.

Five months later, Ukraine lost some territory to the Russian separatists and was forced to sign a second agreement ("Minsk II"). However, it too quickly broke down, with OSCE reporting around 200 weekly violations in 2016-2020, and more than 1,000 since 2021, according to Novaya Gazeta. The situation was that of a "low-intensity" conflict.

In addition to the ceasefire, Minsk II's notable points include the withdrawal of weapons, monitoring of the ceasefire by the OSCE and the holding of local elections in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics on their future status in Ukraine. The major disagreements over Minsk II stemmed from differing interpretations of Russia's role in the conflict and how the points should be implemented.

The Minsk accord does not contain any obligations for Russia. Moscow called itself a mediator, like the OSCE, to help Ukraine and the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics reach an agreement. Ukraine argued that since one of the points of the agreement called for the withdrawal of "all foreign armed forces," this included Russia. The Russian Federation denied having military forces on the ground.

The practical implementation of the agreement is another point on which Russia and Ukraine disagree. While Russia contends that elections in the separatist republics should come before the withdrawal of military equipment, Ukraine insists on the opposite. More than 720,000 people living in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions have obtained Russian citizenship under a simplified passport regime Russia adopted in 2019, which Ukraine sees as a violation of the Minsk accord.

Ukrainian law recognizes the Donetsk and Luhansk regions territories as occupied by Russia, and as a result, Ukrainian officials argue that granting special status to these territories is unfeasible.

Major Countries Involved

The recognition of the two separatist republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, in Ukraine's Donbas region by the Kremlin is considered to have set the stage for a real and proper invasion of

Ukrainian territories by the Russian Federation. Putin sent military forces in the region for "peacekeeping" duties and later declared the need for a "special military operation," which the international community called a full-scale invasion.

NATO countries are making arrangements to contain the conflict and members of the international community are working to apply sanctions in order to mine the strength of the Russian Federation. Others have remained neutral, with few showing their support for the Russian President.



Sources & Useful Links

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