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## Geopolitical attitudes of the Ukrainians in the realities of large-scale military aggression in 2014-2022: historical understanding of dilemmas

### Actitudes geopolíticas de los ucranianos en las realidades de la agresión militar a gran escala en 2014-2022: comprensión histórica de los dilemas

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#### Abstract

The work examines the problem of geopolitical attitudes of Ukrainians in the realities of large-scale military aggression. The article notes that the number of supporters of democratic Western values is growing in Ukraine. The research is primarily based on the use of empirical research methods: observation and survey. Sociological surveys conducted by Ukrainian sociological research groups: "Rating", "Democratic Initiatives named after I. Kucheriv" and "Kyiv International Institute of Sociology" In the results, it was noted that the geopolitical attitudes of Ukrainians in the southeastern regions have noticeably transformed. In particular, if in 2013 the idea of joining the Customs Union was supported by the majority of residents (64%), then in 2015 only 33% supported it. In general, the number of Ukrainians who support Ukraine's accession to the EU will continue to grow. The conclusions summarize that the Russian-Ukrainian war influenced a new understanding of

#### Resumen

El trabajo examina el problema de las actitudes geopolíticas de los ucranianos en la realidad de la agresión militar a gran escala. El artículo señala que el número de partidarios de los valores democráticos occidentales está creciendo en Ucrania. La investigación se basa principalmente en el uso de métodos de investigación empíricos: la observación y la encuesta. Encuestas sociológicas realizadas por grupos de investigación sociológica ucranianos: "Rating", "Iniciativas Democráticas que llevan el nombre de I. Kucheriv" e "Instituto Internacional de Sociología de Kiev" En los resultados, se observó que las actitudes geopolíticas de los ucranianos de las regiones del sureste se han transformado notablemente. En particular, si en 2013 la idea de adherirse a la Unión Aduanera era apoyada por la mayoría de los residentes (64%), en 2015 solo la apoyaba el 33%. En general, el número de ucranianos que apoyan la adhesión de Ucrania a la UE seguirá creciendo. Las conclusiones resumen

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Russian-Ukrainian relations in the post-Soviet space. The level of Ukrainian support for the idea of Ukraine's integration into the European Union is particularly high.

**Keywords:** geopolitical attitudes, population of Ukraine, transformation, Russian-Ukrainian war.

## Introduction

The challenges of our time place new demands on the formation of historical memory and the revision of the past coexistence of peoples. In 2014, The Russian Federation (hereinafter Russian Federation) launched a war against Ukraine by occupying Ukrainian Crimea and then supporting separatist sentiments in Donetsk and Luhansk regions. At the same time, an aggressive information campaign and the hybrid war were launched to discredit Ukraine at every possible level. Ukrainian society responded to these challenges by uniting public and government institutions, forming an active volunteer movement, supporting the army, forming additional volunteer formations, and by informational resistance (Krasnozhan, 2021). At the same time, the confrontation also took place on a worldview level - a number of old established myths, imposed since Soviet times, collapsed in the minds of most Ukrainians. Partial freezing of the conflict during 2016-2021, its transfer from active combat to local confrontation contributed to the preservation of the level of trust in the Russians, but the open attack on February 24, 2022 (using the Belarusian territory) led to an openly negative attitude towards the Russian Federation and Russian ideologues, a final break in the Ukrainian consciousness of the concepts of "good neighborliness" proposed in due time by Russia, ideas about high Russian culture, the presence and influence of which is not felt in the actions of Russian military.

The problem of change of moods of the Ukrainian population since February 2022, the fall of pro-Russian political and social forces is a relevant object of research on the political situation in Eastern Europe. Therefore, the purpose of the article is to analyze the geopolitical moods of the Ukrainian population in the realities of large-scale military aggression in 2014-2022, in particular, through the prism of historical comprehension of the dilemma of the choice between European values. Thanks to the realization of this task, it is possible to forecast certain scenarios of the future neighborhood of Ukraine and the Russian Federation in a time

que la guerra ruso-ucraniana influyó en una nueva comprensión de las relaciones ruso-ucranianas en el espacio postsoviético. El nivel de apoyo ucraniano a la idea de la integración de Ucrania en la Unión Europea es especialmente alto.

**Palabras clave:** actitudes geopolíticas, población de Ucrania, transformación, guerra ruso-ucraniana.

perspective. Such research, therefore, will be important for understanding the prospects and consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian war, which will still be felt in the future in Europe and all over the world (in view, for example, of Ukraine's role in the world market of food products).

The main sources for the study of this problem are sociological surveys conducted by powerful Ukrainian research centers. They make it possible to assess transformations in the consciousness of citizens in a temporal perspective, i.e., to determine the real level of support or decline of trust in a particular phenomenon.

## Theoretical Framework or Literature Review

Many Ukrainian scholars have studied the peculiarities of the Russian-Ukrainian war since 2014. However, after the large-scale invasion by the Russians (February 2022), there was a qualitative reassessment of all long-standing events. Scholars acknowledged that it was impossible to foresee such a bloody and radical continuation of the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation. However, a few months after the start of the Russian aggression, it is possible to determine both the prerequisites for the war and to outline indicative scenarios of its development and consequences. For this reason, an important task of modern political science remains the analysis of the geopolitical attitude of Ukrainian citizens. Note that since the Russian-Ukrainian war, Ukrainian scientists began to actively study it through a scientific prism.

For example, Kuzio (2021) investigated the development of the Russian-Ukrainian war since 2014 and characterized its main causes and preconditions. Parshyn & Mereniuk (2022) investigated the peculiarities of the development of Kyivan Rus' through the prism of multiculturalism. For this study, the works of historians are valuable because they show the duration of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. They confirm the opinion that Ukraine takes its roots

from Kievan Rus', not Russia. In addition, Ukrainian historians prove that Kievan Rus' developed in a European direction during the centuries.

Ishchuk (2022) characterized the main motives of Russian aggression against Ukraine. The researcher notes that although the official version of the Russian government is to restore the integrity of the divided "Russian world," in fact the motives of the attack on Ukraine are quite different. Russia without Ukraine is no longer an empire, and with its rich Ukrainian territories, it automatically becomes an empire.

Ishchuk (2022) further cites a different motive. Russia wants to take away from Ukraine the primogeniture that Ukrainians rightly received from medieval mighty Kievan Rus'. Therefore, through this as well as through its aggressive geopolitical desires, the aggressor state is trying to absorb the economic, social, and cultural potential of Ukraine.

The work of Kulyk (2019) is especially important for our study. This specialist researched the problem of the Russian-speaking population in post-Soviet states while paying more attention to the situation of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine. Kulyk (2019) analyzed the change of the main identical Russian-speaking categories in contemporary Ukraine. In his summary, he believes that in contemporary Ukraine, Russian speakers have become "fully Ukrainian," rejecting the Soviet philosophy. Note that many foreign researchers have also taken part in the study of this problem. Ghilès, (2022) investigated the development of the Russian-Ukrainian war and the transformation of Europe's policy in this regard.

For example, Bîă & Dragomir (2020) characterized the peculiarities of the Russian-Ukrainian information war based on the analysis of the main propaganda mechanisms used by the Russian media. At the same time, Aladekomo (2022) investigated the transformation of the Russian-Ukrainian war through a legal prism. Arel & Driscoll (2022) characterized the events of the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation to the large-scale Russian invasion in February 2022.

Bertelsen (2017) in his monographic study outlined the basic preconditions of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the scholar paid special attention to the coverage of events 02 and 3-2. its impact on the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Note that currently there are many works devoted to terminological aspects of modern wars, in

particular, the study of the concept of hybrid warfare. The latter is a manifestation of modern wars, including the Russian-Ukrainian war. On the other hand, Martz, 2022, highlighted in detail the various crimes of the Russian state against Ukraine.

At the same time, Claessen (2021) analyzed the geopolitical realities of the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation and its consequences in the future.

The work of O'Loughlin & Toal (2019) deserves special attention. These experts have characterized the problem of the transformation of the geopolitical attitude based on the analysis of the sentiments of Ukrainians in the southeastern regions of Ukraine. They noted the existence of tangible pro-Russian tendencies in the region in question, which had a certain influence on local political life and support for predominantly pro-Russian politicians at the level of the national parliament (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine).

At the same time, they recorded that the level of pro-Russian sympathies has decreased since the events of 2014, but this has not fundamentally changed the political balance of power in the region. Consequently, there are not many separate studies on the evolution of the geopolitical attitudes of Ukrainians in Ukrainian and global academic thought in general. For this reason, the research on the influence of open armed aggression in 2022 on the geopolitical moods of Ukrainians in the future remains relevant.

### Methodology

The article is formed as a result of the use of general scientific and empirical methods of research. In particular, methods of analysis and synthesis were used in the study of the theoretical part of the problem. Using the method of comparison, it was possible to trace the peculiarities of the transformation of geopolitical attitudes of Ukrainians in 2014 (the beginning of Russian aggression against Ukraine) and 2022 (after the large-scale invasion of Russian troops into Ukraine).

Based on the axiological method, it was possible to pass from theoretical judgments to certain conclusions regarding the geopolitical orientations of Ukrainians. Possible potential geopolitical attitudes of Ukrainians are reflected as a result of using the prognostic method. The historical method of research reflects the

development of the geopolitical attitude of Ukrainians through the historical prism.

At the same time, the study is based on the use of empirical research methods: survey, observation, analysis of statistical data. The main material for the empirical research was sociological surveys conducted by the “Rating” group and the “Razumkov Center”, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, and the “I. Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives” group. The Kyiv International Institute of Sociology conducted research demonstrating the attitude of Ukrainians to Russia, and their attitude towards Ukraine's accession to the EU and NATO. At the same time, the sociological group “I. Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives” conducted research primarily in Eastern Ukraine. The main focus of their surveys was to analyze the attitudes of Ukrainians in southeastern regions toward the Russian military and Russian citizens and to investigate the attitudes of residents of these regions toward the idea of joining Russia. “Razumkov Center” studied the sentiments of Ukrainian refugees who returned to their homeland (Centre, 2022). The research group “Rating” conducted a sociological survey and used it to form the results of the mood of Ukrainians during the war (Visit Ukraine, 2022). It should be noted that during the survey Ukrainian sociological services use the term Russia to define the aggressor state, so we leave this approach unchanged.

## Results

On February 20, 2014, the Russian Federation began armed aggression against Ukraine. As a result, Russian troops occupied the peninsula of Crimea and part of Donbas. Since that time, a confrontation between patriots and pro-Russian people began in Ukrainian society, primarily in the eastern regions of Ukraine. At the same time, a study by the I. Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives group, conducted from March 16-30, 2014, confirms the opinion that in the Donbas, a significantly larger number of people at this time categorically did not support the idea of joining Russia. In particular, only 26.8% of respondents supported the separation of the Donbas from Ukraine and its accession to Russia. However, 51.7% of respondents believed that the southeastern regions of Ukraine should remain part of Ukrainian lands. Since March 2014, Donetsk Institute for Sociological Research organized a survey among residents of Donetsk. Their results showed that 18.2% of respondents wanted the region to be part of a union with Russia, while 8.7% were in favor of joining

Russia. At the same time, only 4.7% supported the idea of the proclamation of the so-called DNR (Donetsk People's Republic). Note that 52.2% did not support Donetsk joining Russia (Wood et al., 2015). Later, a sociological survey by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, organized in April-May 2014, demonstrated that 25% of respondents still sought to leave Ukraine and join Russia. However, only 5% supported the idea of creating the “DPR”. Thus, as can be seen from the sociological research, most of the residents of Don did not strive to form a “people's republic”. This idea was artificially imposed on them with the help of Russian propaganda (Bertelsen, 2017). At the same time, as the military conflict escalated, the share of those who wanted to join Russia noticeably increased. This was caused by the opinion that a bloodless Crimean scenario was better than a prolonged brutal war. This idea was actively imposed on the residents of the southeastern regions of Ukraine (John, 2022). However, we emphasize that still the majority of the population did not support either joining Russia or the option of “independence” in the manifestation of a “people's republic” (Wood et al., 2015).

The total number of residents of Ukraine who expressed a positive attitude to Russia from April 2014 to May 2015 decreased from 45% to 29%. However, the percentage of those who began to have openly negative attitudes toward Russian citizens increased from 17% to 28% (Ukraine-wide analysis). Most of those who had a negative attitude toward Russians were in the Western and Central regions. However, respondents in the East (46%), South (43%), and Donbas (39%) showed a tolerant and positive attitude towards Russian citizens. Perhaps the reduction in the power of hostilities in Donbas (since 2015) influenced the decrease in the number of those who experienced alienation between the societies of Ukraine and Russia (O'Loughlin & Toal, 2019).

Since 2015, sociologists began to organize a survey on the geopolitical interests of Ukrainian citizens. For example, as of 2013, in eastern Ukraine, 19 percent favored the idea of joining the European Union, while 64 percent supported the idea of joining the Customs Union. After the Russian invasion, however, there was a fundamental change in the geopolitical attitudes of Ukrainians in the eastern regions (Arel & Driscoll, 2022). For example, a study organized in December 2015 found that in eastern Ukraine (territories controlled by the Russian military were also taken into account), 29% of respondents supported Ukraine's accession to the

EU. 35% did not support it, and 36% of respondents noted that they had difficulty answering. At the same time, the idea of joining the Customs Union in the East of Ukraine was not supported by 32%. However, 35% of respondents refused to answer or found it difficult to answer. Yet 33% supported Ukraine's accession to the Customs Union. Note that in just 1 year of the war, the sentiment of the residents of eastern Ukraine has changed dramatically (O'Loughlin & Toal, 2019). Consequently, if in 2013 the idea of joining the Customs Union was supported by the majority of residents (64%), then as of 2015 only 33%. In general, the number of Ukrainians supporting Ukraine's accession to the EU is further increasing. This is evidenced by the results of the 30th All-Ukrainian War Poll. This poll was conducted by the research group "Rating" in June 2022. The overwhelming majority of the Ukrainian population supports Ukraine's accession to the European Union (87%). Only 3% are against it. Consequently, it can be stated that the support for Ukraine's accession to the EU is unanimous among residents of all regions and ages (Ishchuk, 2022). At the same time, 69% of respondents believe that it will happen within 5 years. 14% believe that it will happen between 5-10 years. Only 3% believe that the accession to the EU will take place in 10-20 years. Only 7% of respondents believe that Ukraine will not integrate into EU standards (Voytyuk, 2022). It should be noted that as of 2022 the support of the Ukrainian population for the idea of joining NATO has noticeably increased (Voytyuk, 2022). In June 2022 it is supported by 76%, against - 10%, undecided - 12%. It should be noted that only in March 2022 68% of Ukrainians supported the accession to NATO. In general, the idea of Ukraine joining NATO is more cautiously perceived by residents of the southeastern regions (O'Loughlin & Toal, 2019). In particular, 55% of the residents of these territories perceive this idea positively. At the same time, as 20% are categorically against it, 22% would not come to a referendum on Ukraine's accession to the Alliance (Voytyuk, 2022).

Sociological surveys conducted by the group "Rating" in 2022 point to the evolution of public attitudes of Ukrainians, which occurred as a result of Russian aggression. In particular, after the initial shock, panic moods have subsided (Visit Ukraine, 2022). Over 92% of respondents are confident that the Ukrainian armed forces will be able to defend the country from the Russian army. Only about 6% of the respondents are not sure about the possibility of repulsing Russia. It should be noted that the conviction of

achieving victory is absolutely dominant in all regions of Ukraine. For comparison, in January 2022 a poll was conducted, where it was asked to determine the chances of success of Ukraine in the conflict with Russia - then only 56% of Ukrainians, who believed in victory if the military clash acquired an aggressive dimension, assessed them positively.

In March 2022, about 57% of respondents believed that the Ukrainian army was capable of defeating the Russian army within a few weeks. Specifically, 18% thought victory would come in a week, while 39% thought it would take several weeks. 18% of respondents assumed that the military actions would last for several months, and only 9% of Ukrainians assumed that no radical military success is to be expected in the nearest future (Ukrinform, 2022). To speed up the victory, respondents are ready to resort to active actions. First of all, we should note that almost 97% of respondents determined that they would not leave the country in the near future. 4/5 Ukrainians also indicated that they support the Ukrainian military in the confrontation with Russia, and identified themselves as military, volunteers, or persons providing financial or informational support.

The image of the Russians contains negative public connotations. As the research of the "Rating" group showed, 40% of Ukrainians say without hesitation that the vast majority of Russians have a positive attitude to waging war against Ukraine. A quarter of respondents believe that half of the supporters of the war in Russia, while about the same number of respondents are convinced that only a quarter of the population actually supports the war in Russia (Visit Ukraine, 2022). Of this complex question, the dilemma is extremely important: What will the next Ukrainian-Russian relations be like? 42% of respondents are in favor of never establishing friendly relations with Russia again - in their opinion, it is impossible to restore friendly relations, a little less than a quarter of the population is convinced that it will take 20-30 years after the war to establish peaceful relations between the peoples, 18% think that a term of the next 10-15 years will be enough. Only 12% of those surveyed say that only a few years will be enough to restore "pre-war" friendly contacts (Visit Ukraine, 2022). If we analyze the geography of such a survey, we can see a certain "disposition" towards Russia on the part of residents of the East and South of Ukraine, especially among people who have relatives in the Russian Federation. On the other hand, more than 30% of respondents have relatives in Russia,

and they are in no mood to seek ways of reconciliation with official Moscow.

Refugees returning to Ukraine, according to research by the Razumkov Center, in February 2022 rated their condition on average 7.9 out of 10 (Centre, 2022). In the proposed scale, 0 meant “the maximum level of peace and confidence,” while 10 corresponded to an incredible level of panic and uncertainty about the future. In total, more than 57% of respondents indicated numbers between 8 and 10, i.e., they defined their state as extremely panicky (Centre, 2022). By mid-May, however, the situation had already changed. The psychological state of refugees who return to Ukraine is assessed by an average of 5.5. Only 15% of respondents evaluated their inner state by the score from 8 to 10. This indicates a significant improvement of the well-being of people and muted panic moods. In addition, 94% of the Ukrainians, who returned home, admitted that Ukraine will come out of the war victorious. Characteristically, no one gave a negative answer - the remaining 6% of respondents noted that it was difficult for them to answer such a question (Centre, 2022). Consequently, sociological surveys indicate the beginning of the solution to certain historical problems. In particular, there is a noticeable trend towards the final rejection of good-neighborly relations with Russia in the future, transforming them into the status of maximum neutral (but not friendly).

## Discussion

The historical roots of the misunderstanding between present-day Ukraine and Russia lie in the history of development (Ostrovyyi, 2022). As early as the ninth century, the state-centered in Kyiv was called Rus, a name that later spread to all the lands that recognized the power of the princes of Kyiv. At the same time, the narrow meaning of the term was preserved for quite a long time: the territories around Kyiv were considered Rus' (Mereniuk & Parshyn, 2021). While the lands in the northeast, which became a stronghold of the Moscow principedom, were considered by the Slavs to be Zalessia, although the culture there also had Byzantine-Russian roots (Parfinenko et al., 2019). Any imperial ambitions of the Russians toward Ukraine came later, only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the Russian Empire was actually created. True, the transformation of Russia and its transformation into the Soviet Union proved to be more devastating for Ukraine: while Tsarist Russia sought to “denazify” primarily the Ukrainian elite, the Soviets Russified everyone. The consequences of this process became evident

in 1991 when a significant part of Ukrainian citizens inherited the Soviet mentality: everything Russian was recognized as privileged, everything Ukrainian as primitive (Kuzio, 2021). This paradigm, therefore, underwent gradual changes - new generations of Ukrainians perceived their country differently. Although sociological surveys indicated that Russia was considered a friendly country, the number of supporters of democratic Western values was growing. At the same time, the regime and. Putin's regime was acquiring striking authoritarian traits (Galeotti, 2019). Control of the Russian media, the formation of biased public opinion, and militarism led to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the deployment of the war in Donbas. February 2022 was a new test for Ukraine, resulting in a significant change in attitudes toward Russia.

One should trust sociological surveys that indicate a decrease in supporters of Russia and an increase in the popularity of NATO and the European Union. The methods of barbaric warfare imposed by the Russians have been permanently imprinted in the minds of Ukrainians, and there will be no quick reconciliation with the opponents. This indicates, in particular, the elimination of the old mythologem of “fraternal nations,” which was once actively propagated. Also, a considerable fascination with Russian cultural achievements will become a thing of the past, since, given all the atrocities of the Russians, they have nothing to do with the modern aggressor country. An important dilemma is also the appeal to NATO and the European Union. Previously, there was an uncertain attitude toward these structures. Now, given the help and support of Western allies, Ukrainians will definitely relate better to representatives of the Alliance in the future.

## Conclusions

The outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014 and especially its escalation since February 2022 brought a new understanding of Russian-Ukrainian relations in the post-Soviet space. According to sociological surveys, attitudes in Ukraine toward Russians have long been predominantly positive. Joint history, economic relations, and achievements in science and culture deepened this cooperation. At the same time, the gradual formation of I. Putin's authoritarian and propaganda-blinded society has exposed old imperial stereotypes of Russian thinking. As proven, the majority of Ukrainians believe that the restoration of pre-war Russian-Ukrainian relations is impossible, the current

level of support for Ukraine's integration into the EU is high. According to the analyzed data, 69% of the respondents believe that this accession to the EU will take place within 5 years. Ukrainians are also confident in their own armed forces, which, in their opinion, are capable of protecting them from aggression. At the same time, to be fair, we should note Ukrainians' understanding of the true essence of the war: according to sociological surveys, Ukrainians extend responsibility for aggression and waging a destructive war to all Russians, not only to the Russian authorities headed by I. Putin. This correlates with obtaining truthful information about the Russian speeches in favor of the war, support for the main conventional signs of this conflict, etc. In this, we see a skillful confrontation in the information war, which was not the case, for example, in 2014. - The Russian side failed to show and impose on Ukrainians and the whole world its vision of the development of events, the voluntary annexation of territories, and the fictitious "atrocities" of the Ukrainian military. In reality, Donetsk, occupied by pro-Russian collaborators, has not been turned into a "sacrificial stone" - the city does not look destroyed even after the start of hostilities in February 2022. Obviously, Russian propaganda has failed and cannot shape Ukrainian public opinion. New times dictate new trends in public opinion. Obviously, they have no place for old dilemmas like the mythologem of "brotherly peoples" (to be or not to be together with Russia?).

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