



## Viewpoint

## The Russia-Ukraine war as a battle for a bordered land, not borderland

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Given Ukraine's location between two contrasting political and ideological entities—the Russian Federation and the European Union (EU)—much mainstream work prior to 24 February 2022 approached the state as a 'borderland.' This framing stems from the fact that the land constituting the state's modern-day territory has repeatedly been divided, under the domain of, and/or pursued by numerous expansionist regimes and empires—some even at the same time. Due to this long history of occupation, imperial rule, and systematic violence, and the state's contemporary geopolitical position between Russia and the EU, Ukraine has often been described within academic circles as the 'fault-line' between the competing interests and perceived irreconcilable ideologies of the East and West. This pluralism has also been widely observed in Ukrainian politics and society since its independence in 1991; the Orange Revolution of 2004 and Euromaidan of 2013–14 are two particular examples of clashes between the opposing pro-Russian and pro-European orientations. Although a growing sense of cohesion has been seen since the annexation of Crimea and beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2014, marked differences between Ukraine's eastern and western regions have still been documented in recent years, particularly around identity, voting patterns, and political participation (see, for example, Kulyk, 2016; Onuch & Sasse, 2016; O'Loughlin et al., 2017; Pop-Eleches & Robertson, 2018). These dynamics have shaped and, arguably, also perpetuated the narrative of Ukraine as a 'crossroad' between Russia and Europe with their "competing visions of supremacy and nation-state building" (Dubrova, 2022, p. 1). Or, as is suggested by the etymological meaning of its name: a 'borderland.'<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, this reductive conceptualisation of Ukraine may be rejected by most contemporary critical political geographers on several grounds. Firstly, describing the state as a borderland *of*, not bordered *by*, Russia and Europe minimises its autonomy vis-à-vis the neighbouring states, thus suggesting it exists to be existentially influenced or recruited by the East or West. The orthodox view of Ukraine as a borderland, rather than a sovereign *bordered land*, also inherently denies the state of its own agency and delegitimizes it as a sovereign territorial entity. Whilst valid geopolitical critiques, a much less developed, albeit critical, argument is that the borderland framing minimises Ukrainians' agency, particularly

their attachments to their state's territorial sovereignty. Although modernist territorial structures and norms may no longer appear relevant in the twenty-first century, their enduring power has been largely demonstrated by Ukrainians since the war began in 2014 and, especially, following Russia's invasion in February 2022. More than depicting a robust attachment to their state's autonomy, the strong resistance to Russian aggression by both Ukraine's military and ordinary citizens highlights the need to elevate Ukrainians' agency in geopolitical analyses of the Russia-Ukraine war, as well as critically re-evaluating conventional ideas about Ukraine and geopolitics more generally.

## The power of territorial sovereignty

The widespread involvement and sacrifice of both military forces and ordinary citizens in Ukraine since 24 February in the fight against Russia fundamentally illustrates the significance of territorial sovereignty for Ukrainians. Their attachment to their state's autonomy was explicitly shown in the first two weeks following the invasion when more than 140,000 individuals returned from Europe to defend their country. This unprecedented response resulted in Ukraine's Armed Forces turning volunteers away, so thousands instead joined voluntary battalions of the Territorial Defense (Ukrinform, 2022a). The value of territorial integrity is further underscored by the number of Ukrainian casualties in the nine months following the invasion; in addition to the estimated 40,000 civilian lives lost, approximately 13,000 military personnel have been killed and significantly more injured (Euronews, 2022). Each of these losses undeniably demonstrates fidelity to Ukraine, but particularly noteworthy examples include the personal sacrifice of twenty-five year old marine Vitaliy Skakun on the Henichesk bridge to prevent the advancement of Russian troops (Ukrinform, 2022b), and the thirteen soldiers defending Zmiinyi (Snake) Island who refused to surrender to a Russian advancement and reportedly declared: "Russian warship, go to hell" (BBC, 2022). As the conflict continues to cause significant infrastructural losses and humanitarian concerns, the countless contributions of Ukrainian forces and volunteers to the war effort reveal the strength of the idea of an autonomous Ukraine motivating the counteroffensive.

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<sup>1</sup> Other widespread translations of Ukraine also include 'margin' or 'edge' (Reid, 2015).

Ordinary Ukrainian citizens have equally displayed their attachments to Ukraine's territorial sovereignty through non-military means. While approximately 7.8 million Ukrainians are currently registered as refugees, and roughly 13 million people have been documented leaving Ukraine since the invasion, the UNHCR (2022) has recorded more than 8.3 million border crossings into the state. Although this number does not refer to individual refugees since determining the precise number of returning migrants is challenging in a dynamic conflict, the willingness of Ukrainians to return to their country despite the high degree of danger and impending winter points to their national attachments. Individuals who have remained in the country since the invasion have similarly shown the importance of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty for them. The grassroots fight for independence has been illustrated, for instance, by the widely shared images of Ukrainian farmers using tractors to tow Russian tanks, as well as the many stories of ordinary citizens utilising technology and personal drones to aid in the fight against Russia (Thornhill, 2022). In some cases, the mere decision to not leave Ukraine intrinsically points to citizens' attachments to their state. For instance, one woman in Chernihiv explained to Sky News (2022) that she chose to not leave Ukraine following Russia's invasion as she wanted to "stay with [her] country." While it is difficult to discern whether the Ukrainians who have remained are motivated more by a desire to defend their country or their individual homes, their actions nonetheless indicate an affective attachment to Ukraine's autonomy. Despite the incredibly "difficult" situations caused by Russian forces for both Ukrainian combatants and ordinary people sheltering in place (President of Ukraine, 2022)—the fierce battle for Azovstal, the war crimes in areas like Bucha and Kherson, and the constant Russian attacks on Ukraine's power infrastructure are a few among many examples—the value of Ukraine's sovereignty thus remains a driving force behind their resistance.

In addition to motivating the actions of Ukrainians, the value of territorial sovereignty can be seen through their views about the war's outcome. Namely, their uncompromising opposition to territorial concessions. This was shown, for instance, in a face-to-face survey conducted in collaboration with the Kyiv-based Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation (DIF) in July 2022. When offered various scenarios involving possible territorial gains/losses, military and civilian deaths, nuclear strike risks, and political outcomes after three more months of fighting, respondents in all surveyed regions (only those controlled by the Ukrainian government at the time) stated they strongly preferred scenarios preserving Ukraine's territorial sovereignty. Of the 1160 respondents polled, 79 percent expressed an opposition to any outcome that would lead to a Russian-controlled government in Kyiv (Dill et al., 2022).<sup>2</sup> The minority of respondents who said they would accept this outcome did so because they prioritised restoring Ukraine's territory, including Crimea and Donbas, in the scenario they faced (Dill et al., 2022). These findings closely resemble those from a survey conducted by the DIF in May 2022 in eleven of Ukraine's western and central regions, wherein it was disclosed that 78 percent of the 1000 surveyed Ukrainians rejected concessions to stop Russia's aggression—an increase of 35 percentage points from a poll conducted in the same regions just prior to the invasion in February 2022 (Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 2022).<sup>3</sup> In underscoring the unwillingness of Ukrainians to sacrifice their state's territorial integrity and political autonomy, even in exchange for peace, these findings corroborate the supremacy of Ukraine's sovereignty for its citizens and their desire to be distinct from Russia, especially for those living in central and western

regions. Whilst the views of individuals in Ukraine's easternmost regions and Crimea are underrepresented here, like in most research since the invasion due to access challenges, the fact that similar sensitivities around political seizure and territorial annexation were expressed across the country indicates these sentiments are not only held in central and western Ukraine, nor only by ethnic Ukrainians.<sup>4</sup> Even with the methodological limitations of wartime studies, and need for further research, the Russia-Ukraine war nevertheless shows the enduring significance of territorial sovereignty for the Ukrainian population.

### A battle for a bordered land

As historically competing imaginaries of Russia and Europe have shaped and perpetuated the narrative of Ukraine as a borderland, the value of territorial sovereignty for Ukrainians has largely been ignored. It is therefore not particularly surprising that the Russia-Ukraine war has often been simplistically cast as a return to the pre-twentieth century geopolitical order (Murphy, 2022), especially by non-specialists of the region and scholars of *Realpolitik*. By reducing Ukraine to a borderland and overlooking the agency of its population, especially their attachments to national sovereignty, it can equally be understood why international observers, pundits, and the isolationist right have crudely called on Ukraine to make territorial concessions or return to the pre-invasion "status quo ante" (Bella, 2022). Indeed, the state's sovereignty may also be assumed illusive in practice because territorial norms and structures associated with the Westphalian state system appear to (and may actually have) weakened in other intensely interconnected countries, especially in the West where many of the aforementioned commentators are based. Yet, as the actions of Ukrainians amidst Russia's aggression have and continue to show: Ukraine's territorial autonomy remains crucial for its citizens.

Importantly, the national attachments of Ukrainians may not be seen in all states. Ukraine's unique history as a "battlefield between neighbouring peoples" (Berezhnaya, 2015, p. 55)—the same history that has shaped the borderland narrative—plays a particularly important role here. As expansionist administrations have historically ignored Ukrainian autonomy in their quests to control its people and land, the territorial norms and structures associated with the contemporary geopolitical order have routinely proven elusive for Ukrainians; political scientist Mark Beissinger asserts that there is "probably no other region of the world in which empire building and state-building have been subject to such ambivalence" (1995, p. 180). Although perhaps a somewhat extreme observation, the historical threats to Ukraine's autonomy have nevertheless limited the acceptance and realisation of territorial ideas and norms until its independence in 1991. Following decades of violence and annexations, territorial sovereignty accordingly remains a relatively novel concept for Ukrainians and, unsurprisingly, something they are willing to fiercely protect and uphold. This reality has been lucidly demonstrated since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2014, but especially following Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion.

At a time when Ukraine has again turned into a violent 'bloodland' (Snyder, 2010), then, it must be reiterated that the hegemonic narrative of the state as a borderland is no longer, if it ever was, a useful conceptualisation. Whilst the nuance of Ukraine as a *bordered land* not *borderland* is already familiar to political geographers, it remains less widely discussed that this reductive framing minimises the state's agency and that of its citizens. The Russia-Ukraine war, however, divulges the importance of recognising citizens' agency. In challenging conventional ideas about Ukraine, the often overlooked, but robust, attachments of Ukrainians to their state's sovereignty thus illustrate the

<sup>2</sup> The DIF is a Ukrainian non-governmental organisation and think tank. For more information, see: <https://dif.org.ua/en>. The survey was conducted in all regions not contested by Russia in July 2022, therefore excluding Sumy, Kherson, Kharkiv, Donetsk, Luhansk, Mykolaiv, and Crimea.

<sup>3</sup> The eleven regions include Chernivtsi, Ivano-Frankivsk, Lviv, Rivne, Ternopil, Volyn, Zakarpattia, Vinnytsia, Kropyvnytskyi, Khmelnytsky, and Cherkasy.

<sup>4</sup> Further research could particularly explore the views of individuals in Ukraine's eastern regions most directly affected by the war, as well as minority populations or people long marginalised in Ukrainian society, such as the Roma or Rusyns.

“functional and perceptual inertia of the modernist territorial order” (Murphy, 2022, p. 1). Even more importantly, they elucidate that the modernist territorial order remains significant because the norms and ideas intrinsic to it continue to hold power for states’ citizens. Beyond helping to better explain the Russia-Ukraine war and Ukraine more generally, the significance of territorial sovereignty for Ukrainians hence integrally shows the need to elevate the agency of citizens in analyses of geopolitics.

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