



The Origins of the Russia-Ukraine War

8.1 CLASHING NARRATIVES AND PREVIOUS STUDIES OF THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR ORIGINS

The Ukrainian and Western governments and the media, with some exceptions, presented the war as an unprovoked illegal Russian invasion and aggression against democratic and sovereign state by the authoritarian Russian government aiming to restore a key part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union by occupying and annexing Ukraine. For example, US President Joe Biden stated that “ Hamas and Putin represent different threats, but they share this in common: They both want to completely annihilate a neighboring democracy—completely annihilate it” (The White House, 2023). Both Biden and Zelenskyy also stated that Russia could also invade other countries (VOA News, 2022).

The Russian government and the media justified the Russian invasion by security threats from Ukraine, such as possibility of joining NATO and possibility of deployment of US/NATO missiles and or the weapons or military in Ukraine which borders Russia. They also justified the invasion by claiming that the Ukrainian government is Nazi or partially-Nazi, that there was a Western-backed fascist coup in 2014, and that one of main goals of the invasion was to “denazify” Ukraine. The Russian government and the media presented Ukraine as a US colony after the Maidan. They called the Russia-Ukraine war a war with the United States and NATO and called the United States and NATO direct participants of the war.

Some previous studies argued that the West was mainly responsible for the war, specifically by provoking it with NATO enlargement that was going to include Ukraine (see, for example, Abelow, 2022; Götz & Staun, 2022; Haslam, 2025; Horton, 2024; Mearsheimer, 2014; Roberts, 2022). For instance, Mearsheimer (2014) argued that the NATO expansion and integration of Ukraine could trigger a war with Russia and that the Western governments use Ukraine as a bulwark against Russia, which can “wreck” Ukraine. Haslam (2025) and Horton (2024) traced origins of the Russia-Ukraine war to the US policy towards Russia in the aftermath of the Cold War.

Roberts (2022) maintained that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was a preventive war aimed at preventing the anti-Russian government in Ukraine from making Ukraine a NATO bridgehead on the Russian border, taking back Crimea and separatist-controlled Donbas, and acquiring nuclear weapons. Götz and Staun (2022) stated that Russia attacked Ukraine because it perceived the Western drift of Ukraine as a security threat.

Most previous studies state that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was unprovoked aggression against a democratic Ukrainian state and was driven by Russian imperialism (see Baysha & Chukasheva, 2024). Many studies claim that the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, was continuation of the Russia-Ukraine war and turned this war which was started by Russia in 2014, into a full-scale war. They often uncritically rely on the dominant narratives by the Western and Ukrainian governments and the media concerning the war (See, for example, Kimmage, 2024; Magyar, 2023; Ploky, 2023).

Previous studies show that conflicts between Russia and Ukraine and Russia and the West started with the violent overthrow of the relatively pro-Russian government in Ukraine by means of the Maidan massacre and assassination attempts against then President Viktor Yanukovich (see Bandeira, 2019; Black & Jones, 2015; Boyd-Barrett, 2016; Hahn, 2018; Ishchenko, 2016, 2020; Katchanovski, 2016b, 2020, 2023a, 2023b, 2024, 2025; Lane, 2016; Mandel, 2016; Sakwa, 2015). The United States and other Western governments de facto backed the violent undemocratic and illegal overthrow of the Yanukovich government for geopolitical reasons, in particular, to contain Russia, and blamed him and his forces for the massacre of the Maidan protesters. They immediately recognized the new Maidan government after the seizure of the presidential administration and the parliament by the Maidan forces and the

parliament vote to remove Yanukovich even though such actions violated the agreement signed on February 21, 2014, by Yanukovich, the Maidan opposition leaders, and representatives of France, Germany, and Poland as well as the Constitution of Ukraine.

The violent overthrow of the Yanukovich government escalated into the civil war in Donbas with pro-Russian separatists and an international conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the West and Russia. Russia escalated the conflict by conducting military interventions in Crimea and Donbas and annexing in the violation of the international law Crimea, which was populated by ethnic Russians (see Hahn, 2018; Katchanovski, 2015, 2016a; Kudelia, 2016; Sakwa, 2015).

Political systems are generally classified as democracies, semi-democracies, and autocracies. Scholarly definitions of democracy generally refer to a political system with free and fair elections, multiparty system, and free media. Autocracies lack all this, while semi-democracies are partially democratic (see Lipset & Lakin, 2004). Ukraine before and after Euromaidan and during the Zelenskyy presidency was classified in most studies and democracy indexes, such as the Polity index, as semi-democracy or hybrid regime combining elements of democracy and autocracy. Some scholars argued that Ukraine was democracy after the Euromaidan. However, they presented the violent overthrow of the government during EuroMaidan as a transition towards democracy and openly declared that their studies as partisan (Plokhyy, 2023; Popova & Shevel, 2023). However, under common definitions of democracy and considering the undemocratic overthrow of the democratically elected government during Euromaidan, Ukraine, like Russia, has largely had an undemocratic system since (see Katchanovski, 2017a, 2017b).

8.2 UKRAINE'S NATO ACCESSION AND THE WEST

The NATO summit in Bucharest in 2018 declared that “NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.” (Bucharest, 2008). After the Western-backed violent overthrow of the pro-Russian government during Euromaidan in Ukraine, the Ukrainian government declared joining NATO its priority. The goal of the NATO and EU membership was included on the initiative of then President Poroshenko into the Ukrainian Constitution, which since its

adoption by the Ukrainian parliament in 1996 declared non-bloc, neutral status of Ukraine.

The NATO enlargement to include post-communist countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union violated promises given by the United States and other Western leaders and senior officials to their Soviet counterparts (see, for example, Sakwa, 2023, 47–50). Declassified documents “show security assurances against NATO expansion to Soviet leaders from Baker, Bush, Genscher, Kohl, Gates, Mitterrand, Thatcher, Hurd, Major, and Woerner.” (NATO, 2017). However, they were not formal written agreements. The US leaders opposed giving such formal guarantees (see Sarotte, 2021).

Putin publicly opposed the NATO accession of Ukraine, stated that the United States can deploy missiles in Ukraine which can threaten Russian nuclear deterrence, and declared that this was one of the principal reasons for the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The Russian government before the Russian invasion demanded that the United States and Ukraine formally renounced the NATO accession of Ukraine and warned that Russia would use military force to prevent it.

There was increasing United States and other NATO countries military involvement in Ukraine after the Western-backed violent overthrow of the Yanukovich government and during the civil war and Russian military intervention in Donbas. Ukraine became a US client state and was increasingly used as US/NATO bulwark to contain Russia without Ukraine formally joining NATO and without NATO having obligation to defend Ukraine in case of a Russian invasion under Article 5 of the NATO treaty. The United States and NATO countries trained Ukrainian military forces during the war in Donbas, put Ukrainian military intelligence and SBU under the US and British tutelage, supplied primarily defensive weapons and other military aid, and conducted military exercises in Ukraine.

Various evidence shows that the NATO accession of Ukraine and military involvement by the United States and other NATO countries in Ukraine after the Western-backed violent overthrow of the pro-Russian government of Ukraine during Euromaidan was a major factor for the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 but that the Russian government inflated the security risk and its immediacy.

For example, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that Putin “went to war to prevent NATO, more NATO, close to his borders...” “and it demonstrates that when President Putin invaded a

European country to prevent more NATO, he's getting the exact opposite." (Remarks, 2023). Arakhamia, the head of the Ukrainian delegation at the peace talks stated that that Ukrainian neutrality was main Russian condition for the peace deal and that the war could have ended in spring of 2022 if Ukraine had agreed to neutrality:

Russia's goal was to put pressure on us so that we would accept neutrality. This was the main thing for them: they were ready to end the war if we accepted neutrality, like Finland once did. And we would give an obligation that we would not join NATO. This is the main thing... (Moseichuk, 2023).

Donald Trump during his election campaign in 2024 and after the inauguration as a US president in 2025 publicly stated that the NATO accession of Ukraine provoked the Russia-Ukraine war. For example, he said in the All-In Podcast during his new presidential campaign in 2024 the following:

So for twenty years, I heard that if Ukraine goes into NATO, it's a real problem for Russia. I've heard that for a long time. And I think that's really why this war started. I'm not sure that this war would have started. Biden was saying all of the wrong things. And one of the wrong things he was saying, "no, Ukraine will go into NATO." ... It's always been understood. And that's even before Putin. It's always been understood that that was a no-no. And now you can go against their wishes, and it doesn't mean they're right when they say that. But that was very provocative, and now it's even more provocative (David Sacks, 2024).

Neutrality of Ukraine, which included not joining any military coalitions, including NATO, not hosting foreign military bases or troops, and not developing nuclear weapons, was a key point of the Istanbul communique agreed by Ukraine and the Ukraine-Russia peace deal draft in spring 2022 (see Chapter 12).

However, while NATO refused Russian demands and continued to publicly affirm that Ukraine would become a NATO member in the future, there was no real prospect of Ukraine joining NATO before the Russian invasion in 2022 (see Katchanovski, 2011). In addition to the Russian opposition, there was also opposition from various NATO members, such as France, Germany, and Hungary to the accession of Ukraine into this US-led military alliance. Possibility of Ukraine joining

NATO during the war or even after the war is into real because Ukraine has no real chance of defeating Russia and because concern by the United States and some other NATO members that Ukraine's accession can lead to a war between NATO and Russia. Zelenskyy stated that he was told privately by Biden and other NATO leaders before the Russian invasion that "you're not going to be a NATO member, but publicly, the doors will remain open" (Zelensky, 2022).

Similarly, the NATO summit in Vilnius in 2023 stated that Ukraine would join NATO in the future but refused Zelenskyy's demand to specify speedy accession of Ukraine because of the opposition by US and Germany:

Ukraine's future is in NATO. We reaffirm the commitment we made at the 2008 Summit in Bucharest that Ukraine will become a member of NATO, and today we recognise that Ukraine's path to full Euro-Atlantic integration has moved beyond the need for the Membership Action Plan. Ukraine has become increasingly interoperable and politically integrated with the Alliance, and has made substantial progress on its reform path... The Alliance will support Ukraine in making these reforms on its path towards future membership. We will be in a position to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join the Alliance when Allies agree and conditions are met (Vilnius, 2023).

The Biden's White House stated in 2023 that "Ukraine joining NATO in the immediate future isn't likely... NATO membership in the immediate future isn't likely because that would put NATO at war with Russia." (2023—Russia-Ukraine News, 2023). Trump made similar statements after his election as the US president in 2024. For example, he stated in March 2025 that Zelensky "wants to be a member of NATO, but he's never going to be a member of NATO. He understands that." (see Trump, 2025). Similarly, the NATO Secretary General emphasized that "because unless Ukraine wins this war, there's no membership issue to be discussed at all." (Pre-Summit, 2023).

Russia inflated the prospects of NATO membership of Ukraine and NATO countries military involvement in Ukraine, such as deployment of US missiles, and the imminent nature of such security threats to justify the illegal invasion of Ukraine. Contrary to the Russian government claim, this war cannot be classified as a preventive war under the international law because there were no such imminent security threats. While the Ukrainian government proclaimed plans to join NATO and

NATO publicly stated during the Bucharest summit and before and during the war that Ukraine would become NATO member in the future, there was no immediate likelihood of NATO membership of Ukraine or deployment of long-range missiles or nuclear weapons by NATO there.

Zelenskyy could have prevented the Russian invasion of Ukraine and devastating consequences of the Russia-Ukraine war to Ukraine if he agreed before the war to renounce the NATO membership goal, return to neutral status of Ukraine, and agreed to implement the Minsk agreements.

Ukraine became a US client state *sui generis* after the Maidan and was used by the United States to contain and weaken Russia. There is various evidence of the US-led regime change policy during the Maidan in Ukraine. Various evidence shows US administration involvement in appointments and dismissals of top Ukrainian government officials and in key policy and military decisions in Ukraine since the Maidan. The Ukrainian media, Ukrainian and US officials, and a declassified transcript of a meeting of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine also revealed that the United States and other Western governments told the Maidan government leaders not to use military force during the Russian annexation of Crimea in order to avoid a war with Russia (see Chapter 4). Similarly, the Maidan leader of Ukraine Oleksander Turchynov declared in April 2014 “anti-terrorist operation” in Donbas and ordered the use of force against separatists and the Igor Girkin-led unit right after a secret visit of the CIA director. A former Ukrainian official stated that he witnessed that the CIA director during his secret visit to Ukraine in April 2014 pressed the Maidan-led Ukrainian government leaders to use force in Donbas (Maté, 2024).

The Western governments and foundations, such as Soros foundation, funded all but one of about two dozen Ukrainian NGOs, which initially issued in 2019 a collective statement that any talks with Donbas separatists were impermissible after the head of the Zelenskyy’s presidential administration supported creation of a consulting group with representatives of the separatist-controlled Donbas during the Minsk negotiations (Priamiy, 2020). The nearly perfect alignment of the Ukrainian and US government policies after the Maidan is also consistent with Ukraine becoming a US client state and remaining during the Ukraine-Russia war.

The US and British patronage over the Ukrainian security service (SBU), military intelligence (GUR), and the special forces after Euro-maidan also shows that Ukraine is US client state *sui generis* and is used

as a proxy in the war with Russia. US and Ukrainian officials revealed the following:

Since 2015, the CIA has spent tens of millions of dollars to transform Ukraine’s Soviet-formed services into potent allies against Moscow... The agency has provided Ukraine with advanced surveillance systems, trained recruits at sites in Ukraine as well as the United States, built new headquarters for departments in Ukraine’s military intelligence agency, and shared intelligence on a scale that would have been unimaginable before... The CIA worked with the SBU to create an entirely new directorate, officials said, one that would focus on so-called “active measures” operations against Russia and be insulated from other SBU departments. A sixth directorate has since been added, officials said, to work with Britain’s MI6 spy agency... “From 2015 on, the CIA embarked on such an extensive transformation of the GUR that within several years we had kind of rebuilt it from scratch,” the former U.S. intelligence official said. The CIA helped the GUR acquire state-of-the-art surveillance and electronic eavesdropping systems... (Miller & Khurshudyan, 2023).

CIA-provided surveillance equipment and software collected for Ukrainian and US intelligence information from phone calls in Ukraine, separatist-controlled Donbas, and cellphones of Russian officials. The CIA had “direct contact with agents recruited and run by Ukrainian intelligence.”

8.3 RUSSIAN IMPERIALISM

As noted, Russian imperialism is presented by the Ukrainian and Western governments and the media as the main reason for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. They regarded occupation and annexation of entire Ukraine as the goal of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Russian President Vladimir Putin often in various statements and interviews called Ukrainians and Russians as one people. He published an entire article in 2021, entitled “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” elaborating such views (Article, 2021). In his speech prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Putin stated “that modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia” and that “Lenin and his associates did it in a way that was extremely harsh on Russia – by separating, severing

what is historically Russian land.”(Address, 2022). However, a VTSIOM-Valdai Club poll in September 2013 showed that while the majority, 56% of Russians, viewed Crimea as “essentially Russian,” a minority, 29% of the Russian respondents, considered Ukraine as “essentially Russian.” (Contemporary, 2014).

Putin also stated just prior to the invasion that “in 1954, Khrushchev took Crimea away from Russia for some reason and also gave it to Ukraine.” (Address, 2022).As noted, many Russian politicians and the absolute majority of Russians regarded Crimea as historically Russian and supported pro-Russian separatism and the Russian annexation of Crimea in spring 2014. Russian imperialism was a significant factor in the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia, but this annexation was mainly a disproportionate escalation of the conflict as a reaction to the Western-backed violent overthrow of the pro-Russian government in Ukraine during Euromaidan (see Chapter 4).

Similarly, Putin called South and East of Ukraine Novorossia (New Russia). Russia supported separatists in Donbas. But such support also started after the Yanukovych government overthrow. Direct Russian military interventions in support of separatists in Donbas in August 2014 and January–February 2015 followed after the start of civil war there (see Katchanovski, 2016a; Chapter 5).

Russian newspaper Kommersant citing a source in the delegation of one of the NATO countries reported that the Russian president in his speech at the meeting of the Russia-NATO Council in 2008 stated addressing US President George Bush that “Ukraine is not even a state!” and “part of its territories is Eastern Europe, and part, and a significant one, was donated by us!” Putin “very transparently hinted that if Ukraine was nevertheless accepted into NATO, this state would simply cease to exist” and “that is, in fact, he threatened that Russia could start the annexation of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine.” This statement also shows that Russian imperialism was a significant factor in Putin’s policy towards Ukraine, but it was secondary to the NATO membership of Ukraine (Blok, 2008).

While various military and political commentators argued that the Russia planned from the start of the invasion to occupy and annex Ukraine, in particular Kyiv, the South, and the East, and to create the land bridge between Crimea and Donbas, there is no primary evidence in support of such inferences which are contradicted by the evidence. The analysis of various evidence suggests that the initial goal of the Russian

invasion of Ukraine did not include occupation and annexation of entire Ukraine. The size of the initial invasion force was insufficient for such purposes.

Similarly, the size of the original invasion force was insufficient to seize Kyiv unless there was no significant resistance, like in the case of Kherson. There are no signs that the Russian forces deployed near Kyiv tried to seize it by force. Such seizure of Kyiv was possible only in case of absence of a significant military resistance by the Ukrainian forces or in case of the Russia-led regime change in Ukraine. The analysis of the evidence suggests that the apparent initial goal of the Russian invasion was such regime change or forcing the Zelenskyy government to accept a peace deal on Russian terms (see Chapter 12).

Similarly, there was no Russian military or civilian administration organized in occupied regions of Ukraine in the first month of the war, with exceptions of separatist administrations in captured parts of Donbas. Ukrainian local governments and Ukrainian flags remained in occupied cities and other settlements in Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions for several weeks after their Russian occupation. While these regions provided the land bridge and reopening of the water channel to Crimea, the peace agreement draft in spring 2022 included withdrawal of the Russian forces from Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions (see Chapter 12). The invasion from Crimea via Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions also provided a way to advance from less defended side and encircle and capture of Mariupol and other parts of Donbas as part of the major Russian goal to seize entire Donbas.

As noted, Russia agreed in spring 2022 to a peace deal framework which envisioned withdrawal of the Russian forces from the occupied parts of Ukraine, with exceptions of Donbas and the annexed Crimea. Russia withdrew its forces from Kyiv area and the entire Northern Ukraine primarily as result of the peace deal talks. Contrary to statements by Biden, other NATO countries leaders, and Zelenskyy and in contrast to evidence of the planned Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, there is no evidence of Russian plans to invade other post-Soviet countries or NATO members.

However, Russia moved to annex the occupied territories following Zelenskyy's reversal of his course and ending the peace deal talks after the United States along with other Western countries blocked such peace deal in April 2022. Putin's "Victory Day" speech on May 9, 2022 suggested that Russia planned to annex occupied parts of Ukraine in the East and

the South because he stated that the Russian and Donbas separatist forces were fighting on the territory which he claimed was their own territory (Putin's, 2022). The Russian government declared such annexation of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions and the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Donbas in September 2022 after its organized referendums on joining Russia. The analysis of public opinion polls indicates that nearly universal vote in favor of joining Russia in these regions was falsified in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions and inflated in Donbas. For example, a KMIS survey in Spring 2014 showed marginal support for joining Russia in Southern and Eastern Ukraine, with the exceptions of Crimea and Donbas (see Katchanovski, 2016a).

Putin's statement in 2023 suggested that Russia might intend to annex more South and East Ukraine:

The whole southeast of Ukraine has always been pro-Russian, because these are historically Russian territories... What does Ukraine have to do with this? It has nothing to do with it. Neither Crimea, nor the entire Black Sea coast in general, Odessa is a Russian city. We know this. Everyone knows this. (Putin, 2023)

Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev also threatened in 2013 to seize more Ukrainian territories. He claimed that "Odesa, Mykolaiv, Kyiv, and almost everything else are not Ukraine at all," that "Ukraine is not a country but artificially collected territories" and that "Ukrainian is not a language but surzhyk." (Medvedev, 2023). Medvedev called Odesa, Dnipro (Dnipropetrovsk), Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, and Kyiv "Russian cities" and suggested that they might be annexed by Russia (Dmitry Medvedev, 2023a). He called Ukraine an "artificial country" and also suggested that Russia would not accept independent Ukraine and might incorporate it into a "common state." (Dmitry Medvedev, 2023b).

8.4 NEO-NAZIS IN UKRAINE

Contrary to the Russian government and media claims used to justify the Russian invasion, the Ukrainian government and the military are not Nazi or neo-Nazi. The Ukrainian government and the Ukrainian parliament do not include any neo-Nazis. The author's estimate based on the membership of neo-Nazi organizations and neo-Nazi-led units, such

as the Azov regiment, shows that members of neo-Nazi organizations constituted approximately 1% of the Ukrainian forces during the war (see Chapters 7 and 11).

However, contrary to the Ukrainian and Western governments and media claims, the far right, including neo-Nazis, in particular in the neo-Nazi-led Azov regiment and other neo-Nazi-led formations and members of neo-Nazi organizations, are integrated in the National Guard, the police, the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and the Security Service of Ukraine. They have outsize power relative to their numbers, in particular power to overthrow Zelenskyy if he were to agree to a peace deal to stop the civil war in Donbas or the Russia-Ukraine war (Katchanovski & Abrahms, 2024). In particular, the Chief of Staff of the Azov brigade and the leader of the neo-Nazi Azov movement, which included the Azov units and the National Corps party, threatened Zelenskyy against making a peace deal at the beginning of the war and in June 2024, after he expressed willingness to negotiate the war end (Kuzmenko, 2022; Taran, 2024).

The Azov regiment played a leading role in the Mariupol battle in Spring 2022, but its members surrendered to the Russian and Donbas separatist forces in May 2022 after the siege of Azovstal steel plant. The far right, which included neo-Nazi organizations, such as C14 and Patriot of Ukraine, was involved in the violent overthrow of the Yanukovych government by means of the false-flag Maidan massacre of the police and the protesters and assassination attempts (see Chapter 7; Katchanovski, 2020, 2023a, 2023b, 2024).

8.5 DEMOCRACY

Contrary to the Western and Ukrainian governments and media narratives, Ukraine at the time of the Russian invasion in 2022 and during the Russia-Ukraine war was not a democracy. While Ukraine was a semi-democracy or largely democratic since its independence in 1991, it became largely undemocratic since the violent overthrow of the government during Euromaidan in 2014. Under the common scholarly definitions of democracy as a political system based on free and fair elections, multiparty system, and media freedom, Ukraine, like Russia, had largely undemocratic system since the violent, illegal, and undemocratic overthrow of the democratically elected government during Euromaidan. The Polity index of democracy, a widely used comparative scholarly measure of democracy in the world, classified Ukraine since 2014 as the least

democratic since the Ukrainian independence in 1991, including under Presidents Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yanukovych, and similar to Russia (see Katchanovski, 2017a, 2017b).

After a brief period of relative democratization and semi-democracy following a victory of Zelenskyy in the presidential elections in 2019, he moved to institute a largely authoritarian rule, for instance by blocking the Constitutional Court of Ukraine and by imposing sanctions against some opposition leaders on state treason charges that appeared trumped-up. Zelenskyy used the Russian invasion and the war as a pretext to eliminate most of the political opposition and potential rivals for power and to consolidate his largely undemocratic rule in Ukraine. Seventeen opposition parties were banned by a court in Lviv in Western Ukraine after hasty proceedings and without any lawyers present. They were banned even though these parties condemned the Russian invasion or did not endorse it. Six leaders of major Ukrainian political parties, including ex-president Petro Poroshenko and Kyiv mayor Vitali Klitschko, were charged with state treason or were reportedly investigated on state treason charges that appear to be trumped-up. Opinion polls show that half of voters in Ukraine before the Russia-Ukraine war expressed intention to vote for the political parties, whose leaders are charged with or are reportedly investigated for state treason. This was three times more than for the Zelenskyy's ruling party (KIIS, 2022).

For example, the Party of Sharij was banned after the Russian invasion, and Anatolii Sharij was charged with state treason on trumped-up charges before the invasion. However, this Ukrainian journalist and popular blogger was previously granted political asylum in the EU. A court in Spain, where he lives, refused to extradite him on the request of the Zelenskyy government after the start of the Russia-Ukraine war.

The remaining opposition parties and politicians in Ukraine after the Russian invasion generally supported the Zelenskyy's war-centric policies. This concerns not only the Poroshenko, Tymoshenko, and their parties, but also most leaders and parliament members from the banned Opposition Platform party. The head of the Security and Defense Council of Ukraine stated that "we do not have any opposition." (Romanenko, 2024).

There were many Ukrainians imprisoned, killed, or "disappeared" because of their political views. For example, grandmother received 5 years in prison for 3 likes on the banned "Odnoklassniki" social media network. The elderly woman was convicted by a court in the Chernihiv

region for “glorification of armed aggression of the Russian Federation.” (“Nadyvylasya”, 2023). There were many other similar cases.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church and many of its priests were subjected to political persecution or trumped-up charges of state treason because of its religious links to Russia. Zelenskyy and the parliament under control of his party and with support of the Poroshenko party, moved towards banning this largest church in Ukraine. This was done even though the Ukrainian Orthodox Church did not support Russia during the war and declared its separation from the Russian Orthodox Church following the Russian invasion. The Ukrainian parliament on August 20, 2024, passed a law banning Ukrainian churches with ties to Russia. This law would de facto ban the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. This law was adopted specifically to ban this church even though the Ukrainian Orthodox Church publicly condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and declared its separation from the Russian Orthodox Church following the Russian invasion (Violating, 2024).

According to the Security Service of Ukraine, it opened since the Russian invasion criminal cases against more than 100 members of clergy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, 50 of them were notified of suspicion, and 26 received court sentences (SBU, 2024). They were charged, arrested, or convicted in the absolute majority of cases for collaboration, state treason, or promoting religious enmity (2023 Report, 2024). The analysis of the statements of the Security Service of Ukraine and reports by the Ukrainian media as well as other sources, such as the UN report, suggests that these charges in most cases were trumped-up and politically motivated. The Security Service of Ukraine typically presented Russian religious books, newspapers, passports, and insignia found during its searches of churches, monasteries, and priests of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church as evidence of collaboration, state treason, etc. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) stated that in the absolute majority of cases that it monitored involving Ukrainian Orthodox Church clergy members, OHCHR identified “concerns regarding the fairness of the criminal proceedings.” (Freedom, 2023).

The Zelenskyy government also closed five opposition TV news channels, and after the start of the Russian invasion, it required all remaining TV news channels to broadcast the single television news marathon program. The closure of the four opposition TV channels, which were

owned by the pro-Russian leader of the Opposition Platform Viktor Medvedchuk, before the war and the arrest of Medvedchuk before the Russian invasion was also contributed to the start of the war. It signaled to Putin that pro-Russian parties or presidential candidates won't be able to win the elections in Ukraine. There are reports that Putin deployed the Russian military near the borders of Ukraine for the first time in 2021 as a reaction to the Medvedchuk's TV channels ban and state treason charges in Ukraine (Shuster, 2022).

Zelenskyy stated that rights and freedoms specified in the Constitution are put on pause and that Ukraine is de facto presidential-parliamentary system, while the Constitution specifies the parliamentary-presidential system (Shhodnya, 2022). He canceled the presidential elections in 2024 even though the Constitution only prohibits the parliamentary elections during martial law. The parliament is controlled by the Office of President. Andrii Yermak, the head of the presidential office under Zelenskyy, became at least the second most powerful official in Ukraine even though the existence of the presidential office and such power of its head are not specified in the Ukrainian Constitution.

Such actions as canceling the presidential elections, suppression of media and religious freedom, banning of opposition parties, and politically motivated prosecution of the opposition leaders signify a move towards undemocratic rule. Kyiv mayor Vitali Klitschko, former president Poroshenko, and ex-Zelenskyy adviser Oleksiy Arestovych, accused Zelensky of authoritarianism during the Russia-Ukraine war (Segura, 2023). Many Ukrainian journalists and other intellectuals admitted the media censorship, political persecution, and suppression of freedom of expression after the Russian invasion (Kramer et al., 2024; Vlahos, 2023).

The Ukrainian and Western governments and the media justified the ban of the opposition parties, TV channels, and the media, and prosecution of opposition politicians, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and many other Ukrainians by the Russia-Ukraine war and maintained that they worked for Russia or were linked to Russia. However, such claims and charges in most cases lacked evidence and were trumped-up and politically motivated. Undemocratic measures of the Zelenskyy government were supported by the leading NGOs which were presented as vibrant civil society in Ukraine. However, civil society is shallow and clientelist. The absolute majority of the leading Ukrainian NGOs depend on Western governments and Western foundations funding (See Katchanovski, 2017a; Ishchenko, 2024).

8.6 THE ESCALATION SPIRAL OF THE MAIDAN, DONBAS, AND CRIMEA CONFLICTS

The Russian invasion was illegal and extreme escalation of conflicts of Russia with Ukraine and the West and the civil war in Donbas that followed the Western-backed violent and illegal overthrow with involvement of the oligarchic and far-right elements of the Maidan opposition of the pro-Russian government in Ukraine by means of the Maidan massacre and assassination attempts against Viktor Yanukovich in 2014 (See Katchanovski, 2020, 2023a, 2023b, 2024, 2025). As result, Ukraine became a US client state, made the NATO membership the principal policy goal and a part of the Constitution, and was increasingly used by the United States and other NATO members as a bulwark to contain Russia. As previous chapters show, the Maidan massacre and the violent government overthrow during Euromaidan had a key role of in launching the conflict spiral that escalated into the Russian annexation of Crimea, the civil war and Russian military interventions in Donbas, and ultimately the Russia-Ukraine war.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy reversed his election promises of peaceful resolution of the Donbas conflict, did not fulfill the Minsk agreements concerning the peaceful resolution of the conflict in Donbas, and proclaimed his intention to return separatist-controlled Donbas and the Russian-annexed Crimea under the control of the central government before the Russian invasion. However, there was no confirmed evidence of imminent attack of the Ukrainian forces to take back separatist-controlled Donbas and Russian-annexed Crimea. Similarly, contrary to the Russian government and media claim that the Russian invasion of Ukraine aimed at stopping genocide of ethnic Russians or Russian speakers, there was no evidence of such genocide in Ukraine, including Donbas. While Zelenskyy suggested during the Munich conference shortly before the Russian invasion that Ukraine might seek to become a nuclear power, there was no immediate prospect of Ukraine building nuclear or biological weapons.

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