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# Some truths about Ukraine and Russia by a seasoned diplomat

## How do you interpret Russia's decision to invade Ukraine?

Before answering, I would like to start with a point that is not mentioned enough in the media: namely, the point of view of the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky. Elected in a free, honest and democratic election, he declared, as soon as he took office, that he wished to hold talks with his Russian counterpart to try to resolve the situation in Donbass through dialogue. I would remind you that, in this region, Russia has been waging war on Ukraine since 2014, i.e. for eight years. The conflict has resulted in approximately 14,000 victims on both sides and the exodus of several million people, some of whom have decided to take refuge on the Russian side and others, many more, on the Ukrainian side.

Despite this, the Ukrainian President did not get anything, not even dialogue, since the French President, the German Chancellor and the American President had to insist that the Russian President hold a Russian-Ukrainian dialogue, which never really took off.

On 18-20 February, at the annual security conference in Munich, Volodymyr Zelensky said «we have no weapons, no security, but we just want the right to exist». He also added «we will not respond to provocations by the Russian Federation and Mr Putin». This is the Ukrainian position. It is the position of a country that is trying to resolve a conflict through dialogue and has not succeeded because the Russian side does not want to give in.

Regarding the Russian invasion, we should look back at the very long rewriting of history that the Russian President proceeded to do once again on 21 February. This is not the first time he has addressed this issue

and he always does so according to the same ideas, with the same pseudo-arguments, namely that Russia, Ukraine and Belarus are the same people. And to try to demonstrate this, he rewrites the long history of Russia, Ukraine and all Slavic nations to try to prove that there has never been anything but Russia and that the other entities have not or never existed. This is a myth that leads to conflict, as do all the myths and rewritings of history that we have seen over the past centuries in Europe and recently in the Western Balkans. We know what that has led to.

If we go over the Russian president's speech of 21 February, he lied on every point. Since 2014, Russia has entered Ukraine, into the territories of the secessionist entities of Donetsk and Lugansk. There has been violence and rebellion only because Moscow sent its men to provoke unrest that resulted in secessions. Since then, these entities only survive because they are fully armed and financed by Moscow, without which they could not have survived. This is what almost happened in 2014-2015 when Kiev decided to launch what it called a police operation. It was only after the massive intervention of the Russian army that the Ukrainian army had to retreat to what is now the line of contact around these secessionist entities. The battle of Debaltseve led by the Russian army was reminiscent of the Second World War (tanks, missiles, cannons, etc.).

**Vladimir Putin is challenging Ukraine's existence as a state. Ukraine has been independent for 30 years and Vladimir Putin has been in power for more than 20 years. Is this radical rethink new?**

This radical questioning is not new. It would seem that the Russian president\* is unable to accept that peoples

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and nations that were historically part of the former Soviet Union can exist independently of Russia and make their own strategic choices.

He never sees democratic choices. He always sees the hand of the foreigner that must be fought. That is his theory. In the case of Ukraine, we need to remember a few dates. In 1991, shortly before Mikhail Gorbachev declared the end of the Soviet Union, the Ukrainians voted for their independence by 91%, i.e. with the majority approval of the Russians in Ukraine. Since then, Ukraine has existed as a state, as a nation, and has had six presidents: Leonid Kravchuk, Leonid Kuchma, Viktor Yushchenko, Viktor Yanukovich, Petro Poroshenko and Volodymyr Zelensky. All were elected, whether Moscow liked it or not, in electoral contests in which it was possible for opposition candidates to run. So Ukrainians have chosen to live in their state and to build both their state and the Ukrainian society and nation. It is a nation that is slowly being built despite the difficulties, but it is being built.

If we go back to Vladimir Putin's speech of 21 February, Moscow does not consider the existence of a Ukrainian nation and state. For him, Russia, Ukraine and Belarus are one people and one nation. He has denied the existence of the Ukrainian state, arguing that 'the Ukrainian government is a puppet regime, the Ukrainian state has never taken shape because of corruption and nationalism, the Ukrainian state has been built by negating everything that links it to Russia'. There is also the idea of a Russian world, with the same values, which should be recreated around Russia.

And then, the Russian Federation often claims that it has to intervene outside its borders to defend Russian populations that are threatened. In the case of Ukraine this is absolutely false. Anyone who lived in Sevastopol and the Crimea before 2014 saw very well that it was a city that was decorated with two flags: the Russian flag and the Ukrainian flag.

A harbour, a beautiful harbour, which housed two fleets from the Black Sea Fleet of the Soviet Union which had been shared by an agreement between Ukraine and Russia in 1997.

There were about 25,000 Russian soldiers and sailors, no one threatened them, and above all, between the

populations of the cities, in Sevastopol, but also in all the other cities of Crimea, as in Yalta, there were few or no incidents between the communities. There were Russian clubs, there were Russian restaurants, there was the Russian officers' house. All this was going well and there were no threats. Of course, Russia had to notify Kiev of the movement of its military personnel and equipment stationed in Crimea, but it often violated this contractual obligation.

So where was the need for Russia to intervene to defend its citizens? It was an illusion and did not exist. Nor is the threat against the use of the Russian language in Ukraine. The majority of Ukrainian households and families are bilingual. Russians must understand that it is normal for a state to ask its officials and state media to use the state language, and that is what Russia does.

### **How does this invasion fit in with Ukraine's recent history?**

Vladimir Putin has been President of Russia since 2000. In 2004 there were elections in Ukraine and a candidate that Moscow would have preferred to win, Viktor Yanukovich, was not elected.

This was a first disappointment for Moscow. In 2007, Vladimir Putin spoke at the Munich Security Conference. And to the amazement of his audience, including Angela Merkel, the German Federal Chancellor, he made some extremely strong statements with the central argument that the West was exaggerating, that it was not keeping its promises. He claims that there should be no enlargement of NATO towards the Russian borders. It should be mentioned, however, that there has never been a written commitment from anyone to agree to this. This is not to say that in history, especially in the history of the long German reunification and in the history of US-Soviet and US-Russian relations at the time, there were no such statements. But we don't know, because there are no records or written documents. It remains a principle of democratic society that every nation has the right to choose its alliances, its partners, and to do so in a completely autonomous and free manner.

The then Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich signed a surprise agreement in April 2010 in which Russia

agreed to a reduction of about 30% in the price of gas delivered to Ukraine over a period of 10 years. This represented a financial sacrifice of about \$2.8 billion a year, but in return for this reduction in gas prices, he extended the agreement that allowed the Russian fleet to be stationed in the Black Sea and Sevastopol, which was provided for in a 1997 bilateral Ukrainian-Russian agreement to last until 2017. Viktor Yanukovich extended it until 2042.

Another date to remember is obviously November 2013. At the end of long negotiations between the European Union and Ukraine, still presided over by Viktor Yanukovich, there was talk of the possible signing in Vilnius of an association agreement with the European Union. The Ukrainian president decided not to sign it, because he probably wanted, as he tried to do during his presidency, to always walk on two legs, one leg towards the European Union and one leg towards Moscow. But this time it didn't work. This was the beginning of the Maidan of Dignity, the revolution that led to Viktor Yanukovich fleeing to Russia and the Ukrainian Rada, applying the country's constitution, voting to remove him from office. The chairman of the Rada became acting president and organised the elections, which in the spring were won by Petro Poroshenko. Russia claimed that this was an unconstitutional coup d'état, which is absolutely false, because it was the Ukrainian people's struggle against the corrupt Yanukovich regime on the one hand, and a succession according to the terms of the Ukrainian Constitution on the other.

From this point on, the Russian reaction is known. The little green men turned up in Crimea, the invasion of Crimea took place and a so-called referendum was held under machine guns and Kalashnikovs. Unsurprisingly, the result was in favour of Crimea's attachment to Russia. And as luck would have it, the next day the Russian parliament and government ratified this attachment, making Sevastopol and Crimea two new entities of Russia. For Russia, this was not enough. There was the unrest in Donbass and for eight years now Ukraine has been suffering from a war fomented by the Russian side. The invasion we have been witnessing since 24 February concerns all the

territories of Ukraine, on which Putin has declared war. And this takes the biscuit with the arsonist pretending to be the fireman.

### **What do you think the European response should be and in which framework should it take place?**

What is currently happening around Ukraine is a test for the cohesion of the Member States. So far, this cohesion has been quite remarkable despite some regrettable attempts to go it alone. When you are a Member State of the European Union, you subscribe to principles that you share and respect. So far this cohesion has been quite remarkable. It is to be encouraged, while also noting, of course, that for years Moscow's policy has been to play one country off against the other. It has not succeeded so far.

The response of the European Union and the Member States to this crisis has always been to try to nurture and develop dialogue with Russia in an attempt to overcome this confrontation. Priority has clearly been given to diplomacy and negotiation, and there has never been any question on the part of the European Union of not talking to Vladimir Putin's Russia. The European Union and its Member States may have been reproached for not wanting dialogue with Russia, but this is completely false. And until 21 February, all the diplomatic conversations that took place between the Russian capital and European capitals show that this is not the case.

We were not heard, which is very regrettable, and now this leaves the Union and its Member States with little choice but to implement economic sanctions against Russia, which is attacking its neighbour. It cannot be allowed to go unchecked. But it is also clear that the European states and the United States are not considering a military response at this stage.

In this context, it should be remembered that, since its independence, Ukraine has lived with the guarantee of three agreements signed by Russia.

The first agreement was the Budapest Memorandum of 5 December 1994, which involved Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus, the United States and the United Kingdom (France joined later). In accordance with these

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provisions, Ukraine disposed of the stockpile of nuclear weapons inherited from the Soviet Union's arsenal on its territory and returned it to Russia, and importantly, it did so by joining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in return for a guarantee that Russia and the other signatories to the Budapest Memorandum would respect its territorial integrity, the inviolability of its borders and respect for its sovereignty.

Let me briefly recall the provisions of this agreement:

- respect for the independence, the sovereignty of Ukraine within its borders
- abstention from any threat or use of force against Ukraine,
- abstention from using economic pressure on Ukraine to influence its policy,
- the need to seek the approval of the UN Security Council if nuclear weapons are used against Ukraine,
- refraining from using nuclear weapons against Ukraine,
- consultation with other partners if questions arise about these commitments.

The second text, from which Ukraine benefited for its guarantee, signed by Russia, is the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership of 31 May 1997, which entered into force in 1999 after ratification by both the Ukrainian and Russian parliaments. This treaty recalled the respect for the integrity of the territory and inviolability of the borders of Ukraine, the mutual commitment not to use its territory to undermine the security of the other, and a strategic partnership between the two states. It was renewed automatically. It expired on 31 March 2019, because after 2014 and the annexation of Crimea and the aggression against Donbass, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko made it known in September 2018 that he did not want to see the validity of this treaty extended.

The third agreement is that of April 2010, signed by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich.

So there are three documents with Russia's signature, all three of which have not been respected by ... Russia. This means that if you have to negotiate with Russia and its president, you have to do it in a very

realistic way, knowing that the world has changed and that Russia has taken the liberty of breaking its commitments. This makes the current negotiations very difficult.

### **Based on your experience, what do Ukrainians expect from their future?**

They would be better placed than I am to answer this question, which concerns them directly. But I would like to point out that since Ukraine's independence, and especially since 2014, there has been a profound change in the state of opinion regarding international relations, and relations with the European Union, NATO and Russia. The European Union was quite quickly seen as something that both the Ukrainian population and the Ukrainian leadership wanted to get closer to, and to this end there were many conversations to prepare for this rapprochement, which began in 2018 when President Poroshenko was able to sign the Association Agreement between the European Union and Ukraine, which had not been possible before.

As far as Ukrainian opinion is concerned, without making the European Union an absolute paradise, it has considered from the beginning, but increasingly so, that Europe was the democratic political regime and the open, liberal society in the sense of economic progress and individual and collective freedom that Ukrainians wanted to have at home.

As far as NATO is concerned, there has been a profound change: at the beginning of Ukrainian independence, this question was absolutely unthinkable and Ukrainian opinion did not want to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Ukraine wanted good relations with Russia and Ukrainian society was not a priori hostile to Russia. This can be explained on the one hand by their common membership of the former Soviet Union, and on the other by the many personal, family and professional ties between the two peoples, and this cannot be forgotten overnight.

But since 2014, to their great surprise, Ukrainians have had to gradually get used to the idea that Russia is not a calm and peaceful neighbour, that it has become an adversary to be wary of, against which they must now defend themselves. It should be remembered that in 2014 Ukraine had, according to the wishes of Viktor

Yanukovych, the status of a «non-bloc state» and that this status did not protect it at all from Russian aggression.

The evolution of Ukrainian public opinion has been reflected in the increase in the number of Ukrainians who say they are in favour of their state's eventual membership of NATO, which has risen from less than 30% before 2014 to a much higher level of around 60-70% now.

Now that the entire territory of Ukraine is being subjected to Putin's war, solidarity with the Ukrainian people is needed.

For further reading :

To understand the complexity of the situation, I recommend reading three books :

- The novel by Benoît Vitkine, [Donbass](#). Let me read a sentence from the epilogue: «*The Sea of Azov was in the process of passing under Russian control. The annexation was silent, almost uneventful, but it seemed inexorable. No peace plan could guarantee Ukraine effective control of its borders.*»
- Then I would recommend the [Récits](#) by Oleg Sentsov
- and [Donbass : un journaliste en camp raconte](#) by Stanislav Aseyev.

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