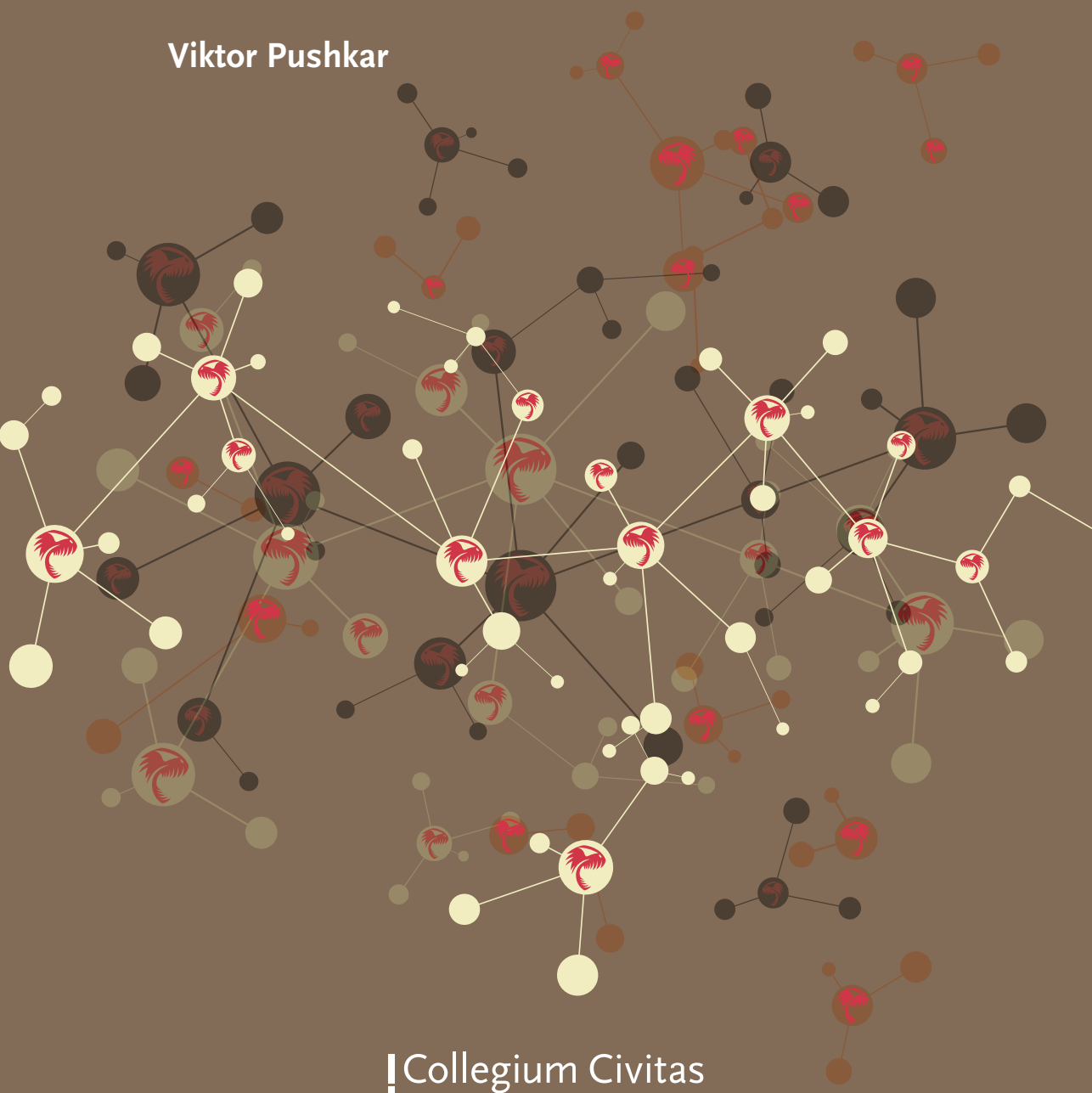


# *A possible way out of the conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation*

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# A possible way out of the conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation

Viktor Pushkar

## Abstract

This paper deals with the conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation, focusing on both cold and hot phases since 1991, including the conflict drivers beyond military operations. We use a multidisciplinary approach based on conflict transformation theory. We include local research data from Ukraine received in 2013-2022, applying both qualitative and quantitative methods. Official narratives from both sides and Russian quantitative sociology data are also considered. The possible paths of further conflict transformation are discussed.

## Keywords

Ukraine, Russian Federation, war, sovereignty, conflict transformation

We can start the analysis of the conflict by accepting a limited set of rules considered axiomatic. First of all, conflicts occur for reasons, including competition for resources, either material or symbolic. They do not appear as a simple consequence of someone's evil will; nor do they end with goodwill declarations when the main drivers are still present. The drivers of conflict might be, but do not necessarily originate from rational interests. However, violent conflicts can be gradually transformed into non-violent forms. In general, we accept the paradigm of conflict transformation set out by Lederach (2014), with some important reservations derived from our previous field studies.

Violent conflicts include the prehistory of their events, when a positive peace was still achievable and desirable for both sides, and the cold phase, when the hostility is already revealed but not directly expressed in a violent way. The radical hypothesis that the two states were always enemies cannot be accepted; in this way we totally lose the options for positive peace. The negative peace, in the sense of a ceasefire, is a necessary stage of the process but not sufficient. Those considerations are also valid in the case of Russian Federation (RF) aggression in Ukraine.

### The prehistory of war

A historical explanation is useful for every conflict. However, we should focus on the most relevant parts of historical events that affect the current situation more or less directly. This way the primordialist hypothesis, that the nations have existed forever, should be rejected. We start with the controversy between the fully independent Ukrainian People's Republic and the semi-autonomous Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, established after the strategic defeat of the People's Republic. Both forms of statehood contributed to the political legacy of contemporary Ukraine. State independence was declared by Verkhovna Rada, elected according to the law of the Soviet Republic. The parliament included nationalist republicans, regional patriots, and the Soviet nomenclature

majority. But the president of independent Ukraine was recognized by the People's Republic government in exile, a gesture which had symbolic importance. This way the old controversy was included in the new state's founding principles.

President Kravchuk (1991-1994) compared the relations with the newly established RF to the peaceful divorce of a former family. But the divorce was not essentially peaceful. The inimical special operations against Ukraine started immediately after the declaration of independence. One of the prominent directions was the Crimean crisis (1991-1995), when local authorities declared independence from Ukraine with the intention to join Russia. The bilateral Dagomys agreements (1993) were violated soon after they were signed. Kravchuk was faced with destabilization, and he lost his bid for re-election to Kuchma before finishing his full first term.

President Kuchma was elected as a politician friendly to RF but also aware of state interests; he fulfilled part of the expectations. The Crimean crisis was solved but not completely transformed. Crimea preserved particular autonomy as a republic; its status was higher than former oblasts and the elected parliament dominated by the Russian Block and Soyuz parties. Sevastopol received separate controversial special status, in some issues equal to Kyiv, not subordinated to Crimea, but particularly controlled by Russia. Ukraine faced the consequences of this conflict resolution in 2014 when the RF occupied Crimea. Kuchma signed with the president the Eltsyn Treaty on peace and friendship (1997); this appeared as a positive peace process. However, the peaceful situation did not last long (Ryzhenko, Pavlyuchnyk 2021).

Putin still enjoyed the important preferences in Ukraine but he required more; Kuchma as a pragmatic leader did not want to give away too much. He applied most of his diplomatic skills to balance Ukraine between the West and Russia. The protest action "Ukraine without Kuchma" (2000-2001) started as a result of Russian special operations. In fact, it came out of Russian control and continued as an action against

authoritarian tendencies in state government. We are still missing any scientific research on this movement; interviews with the organizers are highly controversial. Some leaders were directly accused of working for the FSB, but they still deny it (Kapsamun 2017).

Ukraine without Kuchma's action also prepared the ground for the Orange Revolution (2004) and possibly influenced Kuchma's decision to abandon the Belarus scenario of lifelong presidency and allow free electoral competition between Yushenko (the pro-Western ex-prime minister) and Yanukovych (the pro-Kremlin current prime minister). Yushenko won in 2004 but lost to Yanukovych in 2009. The relations with the RF gradually transformed into a full-scale cold war; the RF had more of the initiative and more resources involved. The informational campaigns aimed against Ukraine, and personally against Yushenko, became permanent.

The Kharkiv agreements (2010), signed by Yanukovych and Medvedev, temporarily pleased the RF but ruined the balance in the bilateral relationship established in 1997. The key positions in national defense, state security, and the police were occupied by persons loyal to the RF, some even keeping their Russian citizenship. The state sovereignty of Ukraine entered a period of the highest risk since 1991 (Apostrof 2021).

However, Yanukovych had to demonstrate his loyalty to democratic procedure. Some of his actions caused protests, but in most cases he was unable to apply brutal force contrary to legislation. On the RF side, the informational war never stopped. Even with an absolutely pro-Kremlin president, Russians were still undermining the legitimacy of institutions and public support for Yanukovych personally. That is direct evidence that no independent government of Ukraine will be tolerated by the RF. When the most active citizens became irritated, the protests transformed into the Maidan of 2013-2014, also known as the Revolution of Dignity. The end of Yanukovych's presidential rule and his escape to Russia coincided with the beginning of RF aggression in Crimea.

## Fieldwork research: selected findings from 2013 to 2021

It was evident from our own field research that a transformational paradigm is preferable to the conflict management and conflict resolution approaches. We will mention only the most relevant works.

The important sociological concept of symbolic violence was introduced by Bourdieu (Bourdieu, Wacquant 1992). It was tested during the fieldwork in Ukraine less than a year before the hot phase of the conflict started. One of the four field locations was Simferopol/Akmesjit, the administrative center of Crimea. The research instruments included analysis of visual data, a small-scale written survey, and focus groups. This way, we received and interpreted weak signals of social tensions; an important part of these was related to anti-Ukrainian and anti-Crimean-Tatar sentiments. We could therefore predict the further escalation of the conflict (Pushkar 2013).

A study of terrorist activity in the Donetsk and Lugansk area (Kostyuchenko, Pushkar, Malysheva, Yuschenko 2019) was conducted on a sample of pro-Russian combatants. Conclusions were made regarding the structural weakness of the Ukrainian state as an important conflict driver. The other major driver was the weakness of the local cultural sphere. These two clusters of problems, structural and cultural, cannot be solved quickly even in peaceful settings. While we were still faced with low-intensity military activity, it was impossible to proceed to post-conflict justice. So a fast and deterministic solution did not exist. With some effort, the local status quo could be gradually transformed.

A series of individual interviews in Kyiv and Mariupol in 2021 further confirmed the vulnerability of the population to influences from the RF. They had little or no awareness of RF aggression, and a mostly neutral attitude toward the strategic opponent, which could be interpreted as a weak form of identification with the aggressor. Only one man in our Mariupol sample openly called the RF an enemy, and he was an internally displaced person from Donetsk. The general forecast for Mariupol

could have been optimistic *if* no military invasion had occurred in the near future. People were in general satisfied with their lives and willing to demonstrate a positive local identity. Unlike Mariupol, very little ambivalence was found in the Kyiv sample. The RF was mostly considered an enemy, a former friendly state, or a former friendly population (Dubchak, Pushkar, Kostyuchenko, Maksymenko 2021).

### Clash of the cultures

The sides in the conflict are large groups that have developed different cultures. Wrong estimations of the cultural distance between Ukraine and Russia were among the conflict drivers. The key message of Russian propaganda in its hard version sounds like “Ukrainians do not exist as a distinctive large group; they are part of a single Russian folk.” In the soft version, Ukrainians and Russians are different but close groups because of their similar historical backgrounds. In the radical Ukrainian version, only the differences are important and the similarities should be overcome. So we should find relatively objective criteria for a realistic estimation of the cultural distance and its most typical manifestations.

Cultures are rooted in the material world, based on artifacts and practices of application of artifacts characteristic for large groups. As cultural practices differ between large groups, the lack of practice compatibility creates important conflict drivers. However, cultures are not limited to material constituents. Large groups produce specific narratives and specific forms of social reality. Groups sharing the same landscape develop different experiences and attitudes about it. In this way, Ukrainian Bakhmut is not a strong equivalent of Soviet Artiomovsk, even though it is the same town renamed. The other groups of conflict drivers, therefore, derive from social structures and group psychology. We can assume that different artifact complexes are products of different social structures, and the social structures require corresponding political systems.



The concept of the human as an agent is both practically useful and theoretically correct, but the behavior and attitudes of real people cannot be totally reduced to social agency. Supplementary psychological concepts should be applied, including the collective trauma mentioned by Volkan (Volkan, Ast, Greer 2002), other relevant developments in psychology such as groupthink, and possibly individual neuroses of the leader that affect the decision-making process. In authoritarian leadership accepted by the group, little can be done against leaders' wrong decisions.

Our study of Russian group psychology theory shows a significant divergence from Western theory and practice. It is not wrong-group theory but a sort of *indigenous science* working with populations that accept vertical hierarchy in everyday life, not just in the military or large business operations. Ukrainians prefer horizontal organization and accept strict subordination only when required for work or service. The other important difference comes from the total neglect of individual factors in Russia. Schedrovitsky, the founder of the methodology school, claimed that no thinking beyond the group is possible. It is, therefore, a mystery what happens to cognitive processes in the brain of the methodologist when he or she is left alone. As such, most attempts to describe typical Ukrainian groups in typical Russian terms will fail (Krichevskiy, Dubovskaya 2001; Krasnov 2020).

The concept of post-Soviet space is irrelevant to the current social reality. It is a political cliché inherited from old-school studies in Sovietology and Kremlinology. Not only is Tajikistan different from Estonia, but Belarus is different from both Russia and Ukraine. This is mostly a materialistic consideration, including not only dominant ideological narratives and images of Self and Other but also the study of land-use patterns (Kostyuchenko, Pushkar 2021).

## Personal and impersonal factors affecting the conflict

As the most important input to personal factors, we should mention the top leaders, namely President Vladimir Putin, who was responsible for the start of the military operations in 2014, and ex-president Viktor Yanukovich, who was personally dependent on the Kremlin and so failed to protect state interests. But an explanation via personal factors would be insufficient; state leaders should receive either direct support or neutrality over their actions from key social groups. Some positions in the Ukrainian military, state security, and the police were occupied by persons who had developed a double loyalty before 2014 and in a crisis situation chose the side of the RF. The rest of the military and security personnel were not combat-ready to face military aggression from the RF. Russian troops were told that they were safe and their opponents would not fire. This appeared to be true during the Crimean part of the operation; there was a chance to protect the northern part of Crimea by military means but it was missed, mainly for personal reasons. Opportunities for efficient security measures existed for Donetsk and Lugansk but these areas were not protected, unlike Kharkiv and Odesa. Significant parts of the local population in Donetsk and Lugansk supported either the Russian military and proxy groups or the Ukrainian military. Predictably, for most civilians, local war was just a disaster that happened to them and did not depend on their own actions. But for others, it was a call to join the process. That is how paramilitary troops and non-combatant volunteer movements appeared back in 2014.

After the presidential elections in 2019, the official position of the Ukrainian government shifted to peaceful rhetoric and related practical steps. One of the key electoral messages of the winning candidate Volodymyr Zelenskiy was “simply stop shooting.” Petro Poroshenko lost with his hardline patriotic and pro-military rhetoric. Putin stated that he would return to the peace process with any elected leader except for

Poroshenko. The pro-presidential party *Servant of the People* won a majority in parliament, but European Solidarity headed by Poroshenko also kept some political representation and important informal influence. The Minsk format negotiations continued after a long pause, and the Normandy format process resumed in 2019. The RF position was getting demonstratively softer on some issues. However, this softness was ambivalent. President Putin soon started speaking about the mistakes of Lenin, who allowed wrong borders between Soviet republics. It sounded similar to his earlier rhetoric about the mistake of Khrushchev, who made a gift of Crimea to Ukraine.

The peace processes renewed in 2019 required significant correction. Neither the Russian nor the Ukrainian side demonstrated a mutually acceptable vision of the situation the conflict transformation ought to lead to. The RF insisted on several positions that undermined the state sovereignty of Ukraine.

The contradictory demands included but were not limited to:

- preserving the status quo vs. de-occupation of Crimea;
- ceasefire and border control regimes in Donetsk and Lugansk;
- the interests of internally displaced persons from Crimea, Donetsk and Lugansk;
- the interests of Crimean Tatars (Qırımlılar), the indigenous people of Crimea;
- transitional justice and liability for the damage done during the conflict;
- changes that should (or should not) be made to the national legislation of Ukraine.

Could we still imagine a positive peace, according to President Zelenskiy in 2019? Before the elections of 2019, he played the president of Ukraine in the fictional TV series *Servant of the People*, where the conflict with Russia did not exist so no measures were required to transform it. His “simply stop shooting” attitude after the elections was clear, but it did

not affect the main reasons why shooting might continue. Can we imagine peace according to President Putin? His public narrative is rooted in an alternative history of the USSR, where Lenin and Khrushchev acted as traitors to Russia, but Stalin was the greatest national hero. In this alternative history, Ukraine is a Soviet republic. This is not true for Zelenskiy, despite his attempts to distance himself from nationalism.

Since the new invasion of 2022, we should search for different lines of discourse and narrative, which might work better for all the sides involved in the conflict. We should not hope too much for personal mutual understanding between the state leaders, as they act according to the collective will and cannot afford to lose the support of society. The relevant sources for the construction of a new social reality, or *moral imagination* according to Lederach (2005), have as yet no systematic description for the Ukraine/RF case, but most probably such sources do exist and should therefore be described.

Positions, interests, needs:

applying the established triad of conflict analysis

### *Positions*

Ukraine – respect for the rule-based order and international law. Right of the national state for self-determination and sovereignty. Demonstrate independence.

RF – respect for the right of the strong. National legislation is superior to international law. Right of the empire for a sphere of influence beyond its borders. Prevent the expansion of NATO. Demonstrate superiority.

The conflict includes asymmetric representations of the collective Other, distorted and abused by propaganda. In the Russian version, the evil that should be eliminated is Ukrainian nationalism. In the Ukrainian

version, the evil that should be stopped or destroyed is Russian imperialism. Is any other representation possible? Why not, for example, two states that are equal subjects of international law? The sides cannot immediately switch to a relatively symmetric and neutral mutual representation, but possibly can gradually shift to it under some conditions. We have already experimented with this way in 1993, 1997, and 2010. Ukraine had to compromise its state interests more than the RF, but the compromise was still fragile and failed to prevent the war.

The asymmetric representation of the collective Other is deeply rooted in history and related to collective trauma on both sides. For Ukraine, it is the long-term loss of state sovereignty, repression, and an artificial famine that qualifies as genocide. For the RF, it is the loss of empire territories, and the betrayal by the Ukrainians, who used to be a loyal part of the population and an important force beyond the state-building project. In the hot phase of the conflict, collective retraumatization occurred on both sides. We, therefore, have to deal with the collective trauma and find a means for large-group therapy. We have had systematic manipulations of collective trauma that have caused further retraumatization and further divergence of Self and Other representation. The hostilities in virtual space were mostly initiated by the RF. The position of Ukraine was moderate at first, including the assumption of the possibility of positive peace. Predictably, after 2014, the response from the Ukrainian side was harder.

### *Interests*

Ukraine – defend its territory and population, develop the national economy and culture, establish diverse foreign relationships.

RF – control parts of Ukrainian territory either directly or through local proxies, economically exploit Ukraine, limit its foreign relationships, and development of local culture.

Unlike the positions and the interests, which usually are spoken about openly, the needs are quite difficult to determine. They might not be obvious for each side, intentionally hidden from the opponent, and driven by irrational motivations. Under the treaty of 1997, Ukraine and the RF established positive peace and friendship. The relationship was formally equal and aimed at promoting mutual benefits. In fact, the agreements were systematically violated by the RF. The habit of treating Ukraine as a dependent territory was still strong, as was the Kyiv authorities' habit of subordination to Moscow. However, this kind of unequal relationship was not sufficient for the RF. The more the Ukrainian government was ready to compromise, the harder the pressure became. So there was no actual need for friendship; the rhetoric about friendship became purely ritualistic.

### *Needs*

Ukraine – emancipate from the RF as much as possible, minimize any influence from the RF, integrate with the global West including its security structures. Develop an inclusive identity for the national state.

RF – regain maximal control over Ukraine, impose Russian identity on locals, either totally destroy the state or make it weak and dependent, following the scenario used in Belarus. Possibly, use the occupied territory for further expansion to the West and South, as the territory of Belarus is used in aggression against Ukraine.

Ukraine has an additional need that was not discussed openly before 2022 – military victory over the RF, and social transformation of the latter state in a way that makes further aggression problematic. It was considered inappropriate to demonstrate the hawk position when president Zelenskiy decided to play the dove. By the summer of 2022, it was clear that the hawk strategy was the best way toward positive peace. The win-win option does not exist if we deal with the current RF central government or its direct successor. Replacing one security officer in the

position of president for another through falsified elections will change almost nothing. The successor might be a moderate person comparatively to Putin, or might be more radical; there will still be limited options for maneuvering as the new president will inherit a dysfunctional system without proper checks and balances. However, we can try a win-win strategy with newly independent post-Russian states.

Quantitative sociology methods demonstrate the shift of public opinion toward the hawk position in Ukraine. The majority of the population rejects forms of compromise with the RF that undermine state sovereignty, either giving up territory or refusing to join NATO (78% contra). Support for joining NATO has reached 74%. The countries considered the allies of Ukraine are the UK (66%), the USA (65%), and Poland (63%), a realistic estimation for popular opinion. The vision of peace as a result of military victory is dominant (51%). The residential ratings of Zelenskiy were decaying before February 24, 2022, but when he demonstrated wartime leadership close to popular expectations, his support reached up to 90% (Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation 2022).

We have no reliable quantitative data from the RF. The official picture of so-called special operation support (64% to 78%) is probably exaggerated: includes much social desirability bias, getting stronger in the conditions of the totalitarian state. Some answers proposed by state agencies are considered provocative by the respondents. They might just be scared to say what they think. A core of aggression support does exist, and is estimated by the sociologist Koneva as 25% to 27% of the population (Smolentseva 2022).

However, we can consider some independent research data as indicative. This finds much less support from young people than old, and slightly less support from men than women. The answer might be simple: those who perceive themselves to be at risk of being mobilized and dying in Ukraine are less likely to demonstrate pro-war positions. There could also be a more complex answer: an official ideology that exploits

the glorious past proposes no vision of an attractive future and no realistic explanation of the present events. The so-called special operation missed its initial goals. Some consequences are already harmful. Therefore, support for official Kremlin positions is less conceivable for young and relatively smart people. Some want peace; others expected Putin to be more successful in implementing his hawk strategy and are disappointed.

### Possible architecture of the post-Russian space

Like every complex open dynamic system, the RF cannot be modeled or described in a deterministic way. Every process comes to a certain result with a certain probability. We can predict the set of possible results of further systemic development. A system of two states directly involved in a war and several states giving different degrees of support is far more complex. From the game-theoretic point of view, the war is a negative-sum game. The one who loses less actually wins.

1. Changes develop slowly. The war against Ukraine lasts longer with no clear victory or defeat. The population is suffering but the degree of suffering is tolerable in Russian culture. Putin remains president, or is replaced by another person affiliated with state security. Elections are still not free, and the state is still captured by the FSB. We might live long enough to see the effect of economic sanctions or might not. This is the scenario that attempts to freeze the conflict lead. No actual transformation happens, just some periods of relatively high and low conflict intensity.
2. The RF defeats Ukraine, but still lacks the resources to control the occupied territory and meets resistance rather than local support. The Western allies prevent the RF from receiving any benefits from its victory, and possibly attack RF territory to prevent further expansion to the West and South. This is the most negative outcome



for Ukraine, but negative for the RF as well. It loses strategically and globally even if it locally wins.

3. Ukraine defeats the RF, which loses a significant part of its military potential, and the popular support for power decreases. No one is afraid of the former empire, so no one wants to show respect to a defeated aggressor. Local elites see no reason to subordinate themselves to Moscow anymore; independence movements gain more strength, and the state divides. This scenario was already probable in the early 1990s, when Ichkeria (Chechnya) became a de facto independent state, and won in the first war against the federal military. Tatarstan and some other autonomous republics approached state sovereignty but returned to dependent status. Their next opportunity is approaching.

We can see some evidence to support the national states scenario rather than a simple regional divide. The Declaration on Decolonization of Russia has been adopted by the Free Nations of Russia forum (Free Nations of Russia forum *no date*). The recognition of the independence of Ichkeria by the Ukrainian parliament in 2022 might look like legislative trolling, but this is more serious. If the Verkhovna Rada supports the proposal, it would be a clear signal that we are ready to recognize newly independent national states and support national liberation movements (Interfax 2022).

The liberation of national autonomous republics is more probable than a regional divide. Economic independence works better when it is supported by cultural independence and religious freedom. Muslims and Buddhists are not very happy to know they live in an Orthodox state. Indigenous people who enjoyed limited cultural rights even in the USSR are gradually being deprived of those in Putin's pseudo-federation. Assimilation and marginalization are still available choices. But why should a minority or indigenous person try to become a second-class Russian, considering it a personal achievement and not a form of discrimination?

A division solely on a regional basis is less probable, but it might occur in the ethnically Russian regions that would prefer to distance themselves from Moscow and gain economic independence. The next question: will the process of independence be more or less organized, and who will organize it? In a state captured by the FSB, the territories of the state are also controlled by the FSB. Regional independence could be just a temporary maneuver to avoid real reforms (Pushkar, Malysheva 2022).

There is no single scenario for different territories. Some would become normal independent national states, or semi-independent states united into some form of confederation, either weak or strong. Others would remain under local totalitarian control and suffer from economic problems. But are they prospering now? Do they enjoy normal human rights and freedoms? Do Russian people feel safe when Putin controls weapons of mass destruction? If one half of Russia was liberated, this would still be closer to positive peace in Eurasia than the current situation, when the whole empire state is not free and most of the national wealth is accumulated in Moscow.

Only a decentralized post-Russian space could be efficiently demilitarized to secure positive peace. No more strong men of Eurasia who ignore international law should be allowed.

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Viktor Pushkar, leading researcher and a co-founder of independent think tank Social Transformation Group, Kyiv, Ukraine (2019-present). Cross-disciplinary analysis and research design skills including Psychology, Anthropology, Social Science, Mathematical Analysis. Expertise in the field of Human Security, Peace and Conflict Studies, Human Rights.

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About the book "The Virus of Radicalization":

"I regard this monograph as an example of high-quality academic craftsmanship. It is an important supplement to the literature on the phenomena and processes of radicalization and extremism (primarily those taking place in the Polish socio-political system, but not only). It will be interesting both for scientists, students and a wider audience interested in socio-political issues."

Associate Professor Mikołaj Cześnik, Ph.D., SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw, Poland

"The volume is a collection of chapters on the topic of mostly right-wing political radicalization in Poland, Europe, and the world. (...) Excellent empirical case studies of particular cases of political radicalization in Poland and Europe are the bulk and the highlight of the volume. (...) Overall, the volume is a useful, well-written and well-conceived contribution to literature on political radicalism and crisis of liberal democracy."

Jacek Lubecki, Ph.D., Professor of Political Science and International Studies, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA, USA

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