



Crisis in Ukraine

Will Bridges looks at the historical background to the war in Ukraine

EXAM LINKS

Students following **Edexcel's** global politics route will reference the war in Ukraine and its background in questions that require evaluation of national sovereignty, global governance, human rights and the role of regional and global institutions such as the EU and NATO.

The 2022 conflict in Ukraine has had a profound impact on politics, economics and society on a truly global scale. While the West's unity and resolve to counter Russian aggression against Ukraine has been strong, with an extensive package of hard-power measures including defensive (military) aid and deep and wide-ranging sanctions, the reason why this invasion has happened in the first place is shocking and confusing in equal measure.

Ukraine is one of Europe's largest countries, with a population of over 40 million people, some of whom speak Russian as a first language. To help us understand the conflict, we must understand Ukraine and Eastern Europe in more detail.

Collapse of the USSR

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 ended the bipolarity of the Cold War and saw the emergence of American hegemony. It

also led to perhaps the most commonly misquoted phrase in international relations: 'the end of history' (Francis Fukuyama). As a concept, this referred to the ideological victory of liberal democracy over autocracy and totalitarianism. To an extent, this was true, as the growing number of democracies in Eastern Europe (Ukraine included) may attest to.

Externally, the collapse of the USSR created widespread hope that the west of Russia would turn in a liberal direction. However, what emerged was high-level corruption and weak governance that later set the stage for the rise of Vladimir Putin.

Ukrainian transition to democracy

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the eventual collapse of the USSR 2 years later precipitated the transition to democracy across eastern Europe. Ukraine began its transition in 1990 with the Declaration of State Sovereignty of Ukraine, which

committed the country's future to 'democracy and self-determination'. It is therefore on this premise that the Ukrainian republic was built.

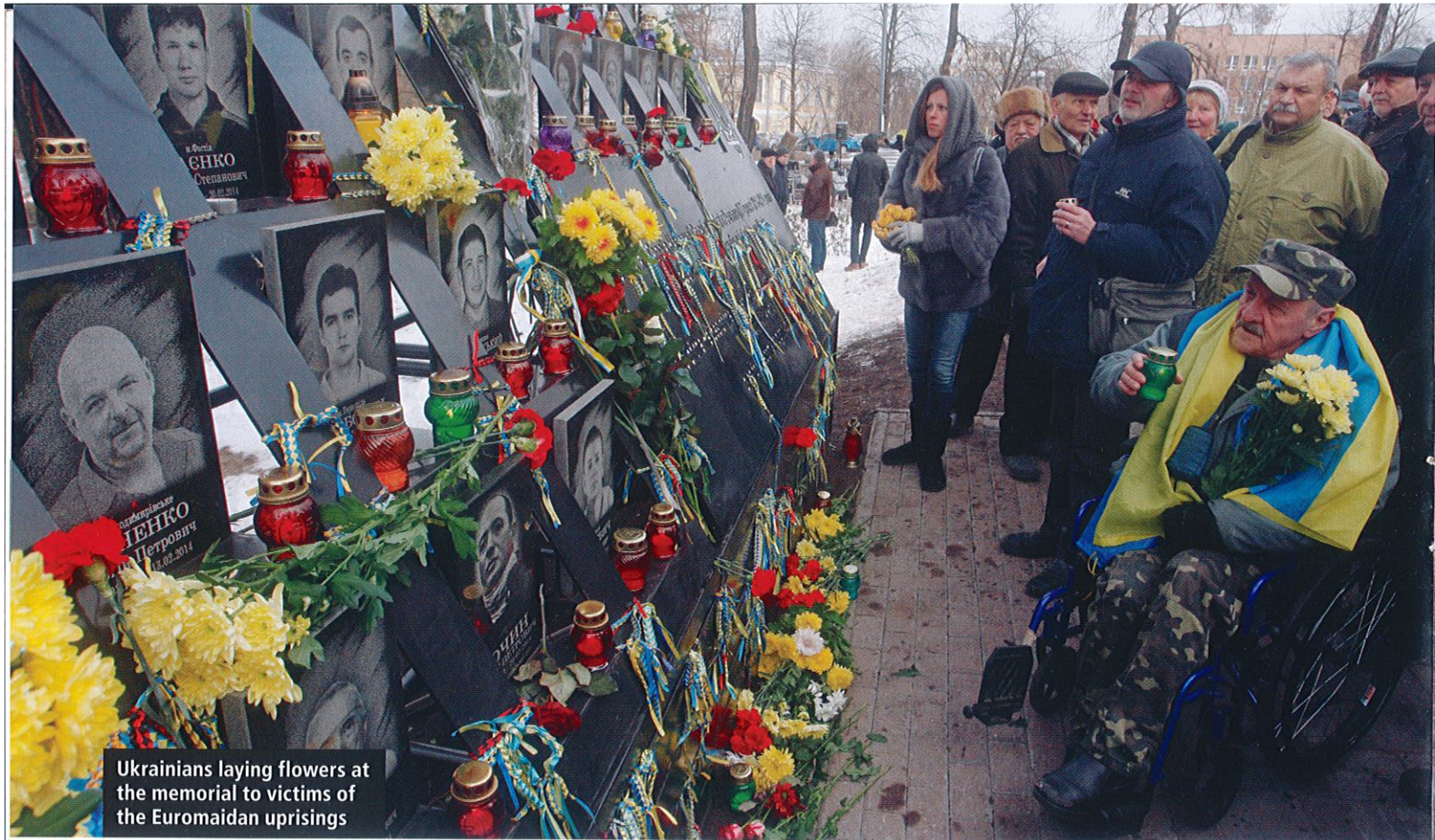
The collapse of the Soviet Union and its new independence hit the Ukrainian economy hard. Ukraine lost 60% of its GDP between 1991 and 1999, with rampant inflation and generally suboptimal economic conditions. Irrespective of this, in 1996 Ukraine established a new constitution that set out a semi-presidential republic under the leadership of Leonid Kuchma. Again, this points towards Ukraine's shift to democracy and away from the autocracy of the Soviet Union. However, despite this shift to democracy, Kuchma was accused of stifling free speech and for turning a blind eye to corruption.

NATO and EU expansion

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was established in 1949, in part to prevent a rise of European nationalism



In 2022 Sweden and Finland made applications to join NATO



Ukrainians laying flowers at the memorial to victims of the Euromaidan uprisings

that may threaten peace, but also to guarantee European security (through Article 5) against the threat posed by the USSR. The collapse of the USSR might have suggested that NATO had become obsolete. However, the wars in the former Yugoslavia provided an opportunity for NATO to redefine its role in Europe. The wars also posed a challenge to NATO. Could it prevent the rise of nationalism in Europe and provide a valuable role in Europe with the Cold War at an end?

The NATO-led intervention in Kosovo in the late 1990s was largely successful, with NATO at the forefront of the peace that followed through the Dayton Peace Accords. The Yugoslav Wars demonstrated to some in Europe the threat to peace that existed on the continent, and a period of expansion followed. Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary joined NATO in 1999, other eastern European and Baltic states joined in 2004, 2009, 2017 and 2020 and applications from the Scandinavian countries of Sweden and Finland were accepted in June 2022.

Absent in all these expansions was Ukraine. In 2002 Ukraine made known its intention to join NATO in the signing of the NATO-Ukraine Action Plan, but it was not permitted entry, and was never

designated an 'aspirant country' – vital to any state joining the organisation.

Euromaidan and the Revolution of Dignity

Although not a member-state, Ukraine cooperated closely with NATO through the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich from 2010 to 2014. Yanukovich did not expect Ukraine to join NATO, arguing that the current level of cooperation was sufficient. He later proclaimed in Moscow in 2010 that Ukraine would remain a 'European, non-aligned country'.

President Yanukovich is remembered for the action that sparked the Euromaidan uprisings and the later 'Revolution of Dignity'. In 2013, he unexpectedly decided not to sign the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement that would have deepened EU-Ukraine cooperation and put the country on the path to EU membership. Instead, the president favoured closer relations with Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union. It is widely accepted that Yanukovich was under Russian pressure to reject a deepening relationship with the EU. Regardless, the subsequent protests quickly built to a full-scale revolution in Ukraine that saw the fall of Yanukovich.

Invasion of 2014

The current war in Ukraine has its roots in 2014, with many commentators believing that it is a second stage of the conflict

ACTIVITIES

1 This article links to topics across the Edexcel global specification. Can you make synoptic links between this topic and the following areas? Some are clearer than others.

- global governance – political/economic and human rights
- regionalism and the EU
- power and development
- comparative theory

2 Delve deeper into NATO as an organisation:

- What is its function today?
- What is Article 5 and why is it significant?
- What role has it played in the current conflict in Ukraine?

3 Discussion points:

- Does the war in Ukraine show the limits of the Responsibility to Protect principle?
- Can there ever be a 'just war'?
- Is it more convincing to argue that we live in a realist, rather than a liberal, world?

that began 8 years ago. The collapse of the USSR saw Russia, the UK and the USA agree to respect the territorial integrity and political independence of Ukraine through the Budapest Memorandum of 1994. However, the fall of Yanukovich in 2014 led to the Russian annexation of Crimea and Russia-backed intervention in the east of Ukraine in the region known as the Donbas. The Donbas and Crimea are both parts of Ukraine with significant proportions of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers.

Any attempts at peace have been unsuccessful, with Ukraine estimating that 7% of Ukraine's territory was under the control of Russia, or Russia-backed separatists. The invasion and annexation of 2014 was in direct contravention of international law and Russian commitments but, despite strong words of condemnation from the West, little tangible action was taken collectively, with support largely coming from states unilaterally.

The result of the Euromaidan was a Ukraine that was moving West and not East. In political, economic and military

terms, Ukraine was increasingly supported by the West because of the annexation of Crimea and the 'invasion' of the Donbas. For example, UK troops were deployed to train Ukrainian Armed Forces and the EU moved to ensure that Ukraine was powered by European, not Russian, energy. Increasingly, too, was a narrative of NATO membership that was building in Ukraine.

It was this narrative that was exploited by Putin as evidence of a 'threat' to the Russian state and Russian people. The resulting military build-up on Ukraine's borders was insufficient to bring about any policy divergence in Ukraine and subsequently, in February, Putin's armed forces invaded Ukraine. This is a significant breach of international law and entirely at odds with the underlying principles of the UN charter, as well as the Treaty of Westphalia, which established state sovereignty as a concept in international relations.

Meeting objectives?

As of July 2022, it is evident that Putin's original objectives in the invasion of

Ukraine have been unsuccessful. Kyiv remains defiant, and months in, the Ukrainian government remains in power with a functioning army. It is clear, then, that the immediate plan to force Ukraine into concessions on NATO membership have been fruitless. Ukraine instead has moved to further deepen its relationship with NATO states, particularly the UK.

Further, Ukraine has become a 'candidate country' for EU membership and has deepened its integration with the bloc.

Where this conflict ends is impossible to predict, but what is clear is that war as an instrument to achieve foreign policy objectives is 'back on the table' following years of relative peace between great powers. What impact this has on the EU, NATO and the UN is unclear, and is worth close consideration.

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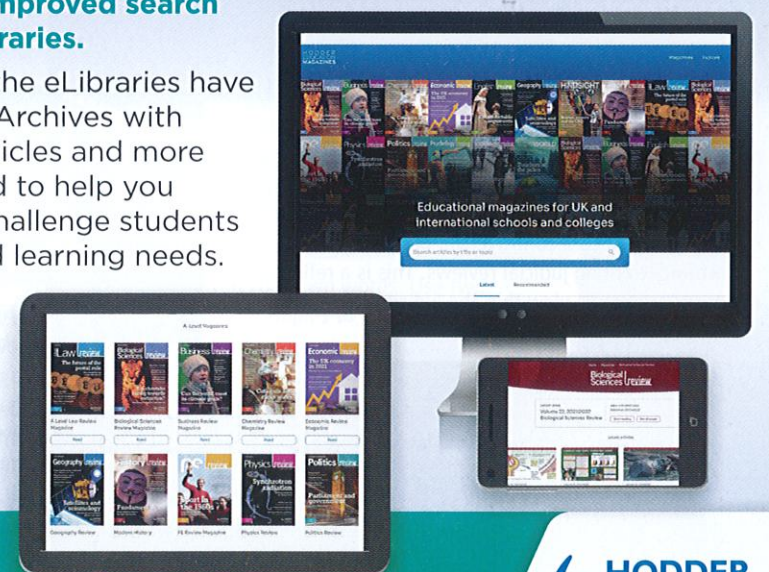
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