



Ukraine Insider, Part 2

Catalyzing Change:

How the 2022 Russian War Transformed Ukraine's East-West Divide, Political Landscape and the Influence of Oligarchs

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Summary and key points of the article:

- The 2014 and 2022 Russian invasions of Ukraine represent a continuum of the Kremlin's aggressive war against Kyiv. Yet, the invasion of last year has brought in its wake much more profound social, political and national identity consequences.
- The 2022 war has united and consolidated the Ukrainians' foreign policy preferences in the direction of overwhelming support for joining NATO and the EU, a sentiment now shared even in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine.
- The uptake of Ukrainian language on the part of native Russian speakers in Ukraine has increased, underscoring the potential for healing linguistic splits in the country.
- The ban on and withdrawal of public support from pro-Russian political forces in Ukraine has entailed their drastically diminishing relevance in Ukrainian politics.
- Ukraine's oligarchs – whose power base is traditionally derived from the control of economic assets in the regions, have lost influence due to Zelensky's pressing ahead with anti-oligarch initiatives, oligarchs' own divestment of business stakes and the sheer destruction of industrial capacity as a result of the war.

Russia's blatant invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 shocked the world, although the event itself was not entirely surprising considering the series of developments that led up to it. Indeed, the invasion of last year bears both significant similarities and differences from the Kremlin's first violation of Ukrainian sovereignty in 2014. On the one hand, while the media worldwide did not refer to the events in 2014 as a "war", for the Ukrainian public, the events in February 2022 represented a second continuation of Moscow's invasion, following its annexation of Crimea after a sham referendum in 2014 and backing of separatist rebels in the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. Thus, shocking as the 2022 invasion was, it reflected the long-standing threat facing Ukraine, which, despite its historic democratic challenges, has increasingly begun to pivot closer to the West – especially following the election of President Volodymyr Zelensky in 2019. On the other hand, there have been notable variations not only in the strategies used in Russia's 2014 and 2022 invasions, but also in the way the two developments have been perceived in Ukraine, and their impact on the socio-political landscape of the country.

In 2014, various internal divisions in Ukraine strongly helped to facilitate the separatist rebellion and the storming of administrative buildings, city halls, and police stations in several eastern Ukrainian regions throughout March and April. Ultimately, the developments led to the unofficial separatist referenda being held in the Donbas on 11 May 2014, and the proclamation of the Peoples' Republics of Donetsk (DNR) and Luhansk (LNR). Historically, the region had many links to Russia in terms of economic connections, shared history, demographic composition, and physical proximity. However, unlike in 2022, Russia's direct involvement in separatist events in 2014 was much more covert, with Moscow exploiting Ukraine's internal divisions and struggles between key power groups, such as the political and oligarchic forces, in a bid to force Ukraine closer into its sphere of influence.

In contrast, the 2022 invasion, despite being officially called a "special military operation" by the Russian government, was exclusively a show of brute military force, making Russia's involvement in the events undeniable. Crucially, however, Russia severely miscalculated the operation and completely misjudged the response that its so-called attempts to "liberate" the Donbas would prompt from Kyiv and the Ukrainian public. The Kremlin's initial anticipation of a swift victory has led to the biggest war in Europe since World War II, with the active fighting set to extend well into 2023. Moreover, in addition to the war radically transforming the European security landscape, it has also widely transformed Ukraine's previous underlying socio-political challenges, which played a key role in the 2014 events. What initially started as Ukraine merely fighting back to survive as an independent state, with Zelensky asking Moscow to end the attacks and pull back to the 2014 borders in the Donbas, has turned into an emboldened Kyiv – bolstered by unprecedented public support – vowing to reclaim all of Ukraine's territories, including the annexed Crimea.

The remaining sections of this paper will provide a brief account of the 2014 and 2022 invasions, and discuss their impact on the linguistic, political, and societal divisions within Ukraine. Additionally, the paper will zoom in on the role of one of the most prominent groups in the country, the oligarchs, and their involvement in the 2014 separatist rebellions, ultimately also reflecting on how the 2022 war has impacted their positions by transforming the wider political-economic landscape of Ukraine. The discussion ends with a conclusion and a reflection on the changes to Ukraine's societal fabric, suggesting that, despite a myriad of challenges, some of the unintended consequences of the war may well be the establishment of a more unified Ukraine, greater momentum behind the democratic and anti-corruption reforms, and the curtailment of the notorious influence of the oligarchs.

2014 and 2022: Similarities and Differences in Societal Impact

Ukraine's independent history has been marked by various internal divisions. These include differences between the regions regarding preferences for or against greater political and economic autonomy for the south-eastern parts of the country, linguistic divisions as well as very clear and strong political splits during electoral cycles, which virtually always saw more Russia-sympathetic candidates from the Donbas dominate the polls in the southeast.

Regional geopolitical divisions and foreign policy preferences

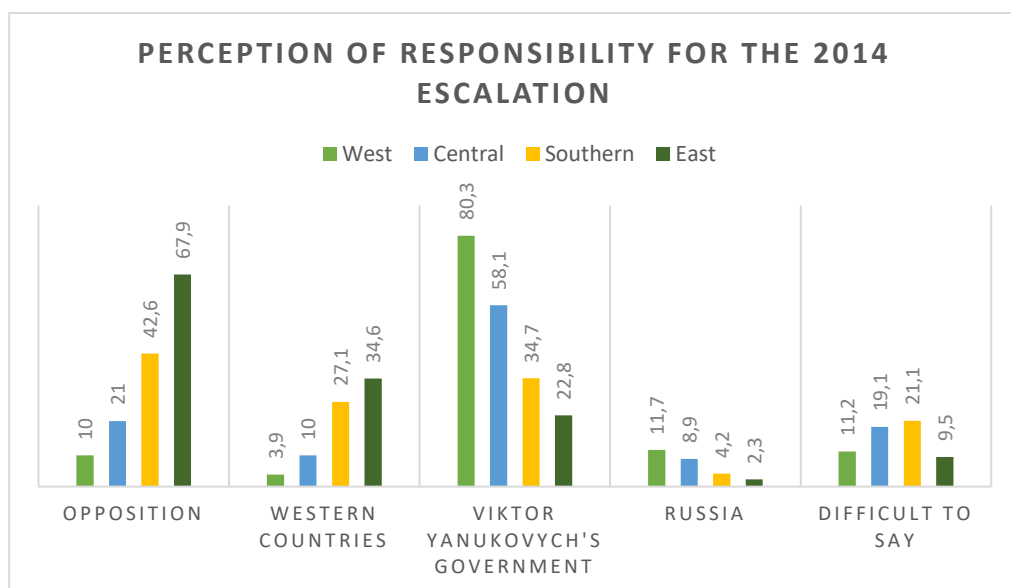
During the 2014 Russia-backed separatist crisis, Viktor Yanukovich was the country's president. Throughout his presidency, Yanukovich sent ambivalent messages to both Russia and the European Union (EU) regarding which direction Ukraine would take. On 21 November 2013, however, Ukraine was due to sign the EU Association Agreement, which would have brought the country closer to the European market. Instead, at the last minute, the preparations to sign the Association Agreement were indefinitely suspended, which unmistakably signalled Yanukovich's pivoting towards Russia. The decision to forego the signing of the Agreement immediately resulted in the first wave of protests on the *Maidan Nezaleznosti* (Independence Square) in Kyiv. The protest came to be known as the Euromaidan Revolution (sometimes also referred to as the Revolution of Dignity).

The protest drew most of its participants from western and central Ukraine, areas that historically have stronger nationalistic roots, greater antipathy towards Russia, and preferences for more western-oriented politicians and political parties. Ultimately, what started off as a peaceful demonstration quickly descended into violence after the state's special police forces, Berkut, attacked the protestors on the night of 30 November 2013 in an attempt to break up the demonstration. The subsequent protest events were punctuated by violent clashes between the security forces and the protestors. The most brutal episode of protest violence occurred in February when unidentified snipers shot at the

crowd with rubber as well as live ammunition, killing over one hundred people. The main protest lasted until 23 February 2014 when Yanukovich fled to Russia.

The violence in the Square, however, was portrayed and interpreted differently in the south-eastern parts of Ukraine, underlining both the pre-existing regional geopolitical preferences and the influence of regional economic elites over the information landscape. For example, while in the center-west, the violence was strictly labelled as an act of repression and government brutality, in the south-east it was generally portrayed and interpreted as the government's attempt to instil order among a radicalized public, which the media regularly accused of far-right extremism. Due to a lengthy and complicated history with Ukrainian nationalism, the sentiment and reactions to the government's response differed depending on where in the country citizens resided. In general, the south-east was much more sympathetic towards Yanukovich, as this part of the country was his stronghold, whereas the center-west came out fiercely against him. As one might expect, the pro-Euromaidan movement in the south-east of the country never reached the same magnitude as in the center-west. Instead, the former regions saw a rise in counter-protests known as anti-Euromaidan.

A public opinion survey carried out by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) between 8 – 18 February 2014 is reflective of the above-mentioned trends by region. When asked the question “Who, in your opinion, is primarily responsible for the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine?”, a clear division is noted between various parts of the country. As demonstrated in the bar graph below, the clearest divisions are between eastern and western Ukraine, with 80.3% of the respondents in the western regions blaming Yanukovich's government for the protest escalation, compared to only 22.8% in the eastern part. Instead, those in the east primarily blamed the domestic political opposition in Ukraine for the escalation, with 67.9% stating that they believe this group to be responsible for the developments.



Source: (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2014)

Moreover, the same survey also revealed that those in eastern Ukraine believed that the primary catalyst for bringing out protesters to the streets in Kyiv was the influence of Western countries, with the intent of pulling Ukraine closer into their geopolitical orbit. According to the results, 57.4% in the east believed this to be the case, compared to only 5.3% in the west. To that end, 51.9% of respondents in the east and 32.2% in the south said that they stood on the side of the government headed by Viktor Yanukovich: a stark contrast to the 2.6% in the west and 10.7% in the center, that still reported support for Yanukovich's government. Unsurprisingly, therefore, preferences for closer integration with the EU and Russia also differed sharply by region in 2014. Between 22 April – 14 May, 82.3% in the west and 57.9% in the center said that they would vote for joining the EU as opposed to the Russia-led Customs Union. This is in contrast to 28.3 in the south and 11.7% in the east expressing support for a closer alignment with the bloc (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2014).

Given the above-described divisions within Ukrainian society, it may be rather easy to see why and how Moscow had completely miscalculated its actions in 2022 and misjudged the way the Ukrainian public, especially in the eastern Donbas region, would respond to their so-called plans to “liberate” this region. To that end, **the situation following Russia's direct invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has been met completely differently by the Ukrainian public**, including in the regions that had previously displayed a greater preference for closer ties with Russia.

Public opinion surveys revealed that, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, public support for closer integration with western organizations such as the EU and NATO reached all-time highs. For example, **the survey results from October 2022 revealed that across all regions, support for**

Ukraine's membership in NATO was at 83% of the surveyed public nationwide, with even 69% in the eastern region, which has historically been much more sceptical and opposed to this geopolitical orientation (Rating Group, 2022). This is also in contrast to 55% in favor in November and thus strongly underlines the transformative impact of the 2022 invasion on completely reshaping the geopolitical and security preferences amongst Ukrainians. Similarly, regarding public preferences for joining the EU, public opinion data from April 2022 demonstrates that support for joining the bloc has increased to an unprecedented 91% across the country (Reuters, 2022). This is compared to about 60% in the years prior to the 2022 invasion.

Indeed, unlike in 2014, as a direct result of the war and backed by strong domestic public support, Kyiv applied for a fast-tracked EU membership, ultimately receiving candidate status in July 2022, in what represented one of the most important and concrete geopolitical shifts in Ukraine's and Europe's recent history. Although the path toward fully-fledged membership is nevertheless set to take several years at least and depends on Kyiv's ability to implement substantive democratic and anti-corruption reforms (e.g. cleaning up the country's judiciary branch, and implementing the anti-oligarch law passed by President Volodymyr Zelensky's administration in 2021), the event nevertheless cements the country much more closely with Europe and the collective West. Particularly regarding NATO, despite Russia's warnings against Kyiv pursuing closer ties with the alliance, the political response in Kyiv radically shifted from purely seeking to ensure Ukraine's survival as an independent state in the first weeks of the invasion to applying for membership in the alliance in September 2022. As such, the sea-change shifts in geopolitical orientation, backed by public support, underline the 2022 war's profound impact on the societal and political calculus.

Regional views in favor of continued war effort or peaceful settlement

Prior to the 2022 invasion Ukraine was sharply divided along regional lines in terms of its preferences for greater regional autonomy/closer integration with Russia for the south-eastern regions. This is one of the key variables that Moscow likely significantly miscalculated given the described differences in 2014. For example, despite the devastating impact of the war, especially in the southeast, on a societal level, **there is currently an extremely limited public appetite for surrendering any Ukrainian territories to Russia**. According to the latest available public opinion data, between 19 – 24 May 2022, 82% of surveyed Ukrainians agreed with the statement that “under no circumstances should Ukraine relinquish any of its territories, even if this prolongs the war” (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2022). This strongly indicates that the likelihood of domestic public pressure on Kyiv to change its current military and political strategies is low and is unlikely to be altered in the short term.

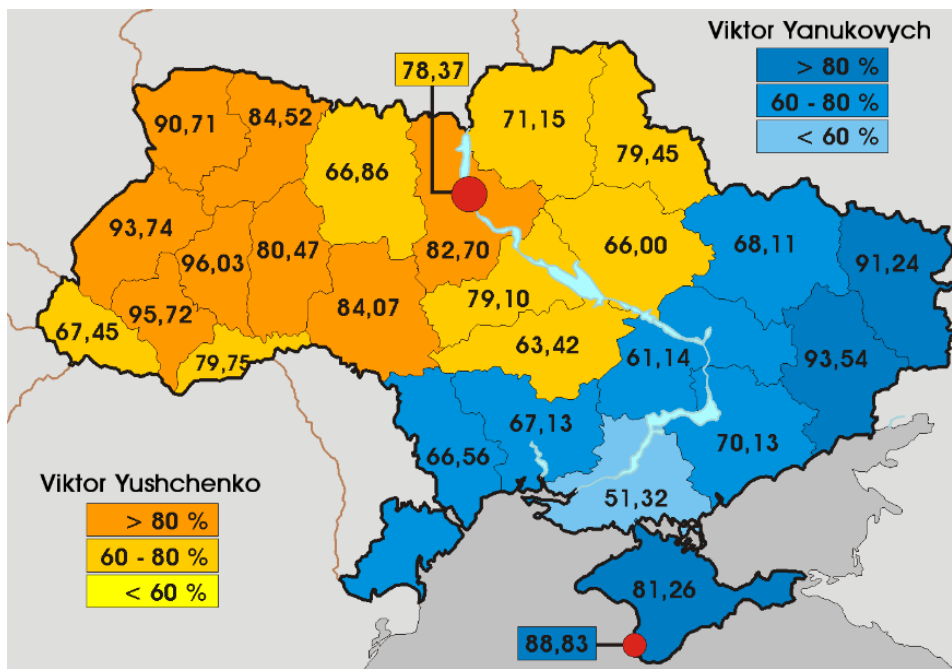
However, it can be envisioned that the desire for a peaceful resolution is likely to increase should the war extend far into 2023 and/or beyond, given the unprecedented and ever-growing economic and emotional costs of the war. Regional divisions in this regard are also likely to become more pronounced, given the existing variation in regional preferences for an immediate ceasefire, despite unanimous opposition to Russia’s aggression. For example, public opinion data between 19 – 24 May 2022 show that the regions that have been the hardest hit by the direct fallout from the war are more willing to accept an immediate ceasefire, with 45% of respondents in the east reporting that they want to keep fighting until the liberation of all Russia-occupied territories, compared to 65% in western Ukraine (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2022). Whilst the extremely dire living conditions in the war-torn regions and Russia’s use of terror to pressure Kyiv to surrender will inevitably persist, the broader “rally around the flag” impact that the war has had on Ukraine’s society is highly unlikely to diminish, with societal memories of the invasion inevitably set to continue for generations to come.

Forging linguistic unity

Lastly, another long-standing division that has existed in the country and often served as a divisive factor between the southeast and the west is the use of Russian versus the Ukrainian language. According to a 2019 survey, about 46% of the country’s population speak Ukrainian at home, 28% speak Russian, and a quarter speak both equally (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2019). Although evidence is limited at present, another interesting trend that may well emerge moving forward is the war’s potential impact on bridging the regional linguistic cleavages. Available preliminary and anecdotal evidence suggests that **the uptake of the Ukrainian language among native Russian speakers has increased since the invasion**, with reports showing that a new [Ukrainian conversation club](#) has received nearly 1,000 registrations in just three days (Lviv Polytechnic National University, 2022). This suggests that Russian-speaking Ukrainians are seeking to learn Ukrainian in the face of the war. Whether the development is merely a short-term trend or an indication of a broader shift that will eventually help to reshape Ukraine’s linguistic fault lines, remains to be seen. It is nevertheless yet another potentially transformative and unintended consequence of the 2022 invasion.

2014 and 2022: Impact on Politics

Prior to Zelensky becoming president in 2019, Ukraine’s electoral map was sharply divided, as demonstrated by the map below, with regard to the 2004 presidential election, which resulted in the second round between Viktor Yanukovich and Viktor Yushchenko.



Source: (Electoral Geography, 2004)

As one can see from the above map, there are clear-cut geographical electoral splits between the east and west; and such divisions have been present throughout Ukraine’s independent electoral history. While the east and the south have traditionally been much more heavily influenced by pro-Russian forces (including the region’s oligarchs that supported political candidates for the Donbas) and had closer economic and cultural links to the east, the western part of Ukraine has historically been much more pro-European and had stronger connections to traditional Ukrainian values and identity. Ultimately, as we know, in 2004 these sharp political divisions, paired with a prominent electoral fraud scandal, resulted in one of the most famous instances of grassroots mass mobilization in Ukraine’s independent history, known as the Orange Revolution.

In many ways, Ukraine’s electoral lines had already profoundly shifted in 2019, following the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2019, which brought President Zelensky and his Servant of the People party into power in a landslide victory. **Unprecedented in Ukraine’s independent history, Zelensky was a preferred candidate even in the regions that had previously voted for candidates that came from the western part of the country**, garnering over 73% of the vote – far ahead of then-incumbent President Petro Poroshenko, who received 24%. Across all regions, Zelensky was the preferred candidate to Poroshenko, who took over as president following the Euromaidan revolution in 2014. Of all the regions, Lviv was the only one where Zelensky did not garner a majority and received only 34.5% of the vote (Reuters, 2019). Although support for Zelensky was still the strongest in southeastern Ukraine, where he is originally from, the 2019 election nevertheless marked the first clear break in Ukraine’s electoral lines.

Notably, unlike previous presidents, Zelensky's connection to one of the most notorious groups in the country, the oligarchs, was much more muted. This is despite the fact that he has often been linked in the media to one of the main economic elites in the country, Ihor Kolomoisky. However, his general background, which stemmed from his acting career, was significantly different from that of all of the former leaders in Ukraine. Additionally, unlike in previous elections, social media and internet-based campaigning were the main features of the 2019 election, marking a significant break from previous instances of oligarch-backed candidates and reliance on the large-scale mobilization of crowds, trade unions as well as relatively frequent accusations of electoral fraud.

In the time of war, Zelensky's rule continues to be highly transformative, with the president maintaining unwavering public support. Public opinion surveys from June 2022 reveal that 93% in the west and 86% in the east "strongly approve" and "somewhat approve" of the president's performance (International Republican Institute, 2022). Furthermore, despite the war, backed by strong public support, Zelensky's government only strengthened its rule and has continued to push ahead with a number of critical reforms that had shown little-to-no sign of materializing before. This is most clearly evident with regard to tackling the deeply rooted influence of the oligarchs, who have been among the primary obstacles to Ukraine's anti-corruption and democratic reforms and will be discussed in greater detail in the subsequent sections.

Moreover, the 2022 invasion has also directly precipitated a crackdown against the domestic pro-Russian political forces. For example, **in May, Zelensky banned pro-Russian political parties, which will severely, if not entirely, undermine their ability to participate in Ukraine's future political activities.** The new law has first and foremost had an impact on and targeted the Opposition Platform for Life party, which had 44 out of 250 seats in parliament at the time that the law was passed. The party was previously the Party of Regions, headed by Yanukovich before the 2014 revolution. During the invasion, the party was led by the notorious pro-Kremlin politician and oligarch, Viktor Medvedchuk, who is the godfather of one of President Putin's daughters. Meanwhile, in a bid to limit his influence and the influence of pro-Russian political forces and oligarchs, Medvedchuk was especially targeted by the Ukrainian government and was put under house arrest on treason charges. Although his support base in Ukraine has always been very low, it fell still further just in the leadup to the invasion, dropping from 2.3% in October 2021 to 1.9% in late-January 2022 (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2022). Now, given the highly destructive impact of the war, the support for pro-Russian political forces is almost certainly set to remain extremely low for the foreseeable future. As such, these and/or similar political forces and parties are highly unlikely to have a place in Ukraine's politics moving forward, despite the previously long-standing divisions in Ukraine's political landscape, which had given them access to national politics.

Reshaping and redefining Ukraine's oligarchs

In both Russia and Ukraine, the term “oligarch” is used virtually daily. In everyday speech, most people use this word to describe ultra-rich individuals that are close to incumbent politicians, are assumed to be corrupt, and hoard immense amounts of wealth – much of which is hidden in their offshore bank accounts. The existing literature on these actors describes oligarchs as businessmen that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union and describes them as “the wealthiest elite members” of society (Markus & Charnysh, 2017; Markus, 2017), who “use their wealth to exert political influence” (Pleines, 2016; Puglisi, 2003).

In Ukraine especially, oligarchs are very strongly rooted in their regions, with most of their influence and business activity confined to this specific milieu. This is mainly due to the economic character and composition of Ukraine's regions, particularly those in the east of the country, which are endowed with natural resources. The organization of the economy around large sectors like coal meant that by capturing a specific economic sector within a region, these economic groups were able to dominate the entire chain of production with little or no outside competition. At first, the interests that succeeded in controlling enterprises were either regime insiders that had experience in the Soviet economy and had access to broad intellectual networks built during the Soviet Union, or they were younger and more “entrepreneurial” with the necessary political-economic connections.¹ In both cases, these individuals were strategically well-placed to achieve economic enrichment.

Hence, the regional economic structure of east Ukraine, particularly of Donetsk and Luhansk, allowed for the emergence and establishment of the country's most powerful oligarchic groups that have historically thrown their vast resources behind specific political candidates and parties. Once elected into office, these political forces then represented the interests of the oligarchs that essentially put them into a position of power in the first place.

The role of oligarchs during the 2014 separatist crisis in the east

Given the reluctance of oligarchs for democratic reforms, the 2013-14 crisis was naturally a pivotal moment for this group, as the main questions facing Ukraine were the future political direction of the country and the implementation of anti-corruption and democratic reforms. To that end, oligarchs that threw their political weight behind Viktor Yanukovych initially appear to have supported his pivot away from the EU. One of the key individuals, who has often come under the spotlight, particularly in 2014, is Ukraine's wealthiest oligarch, Rinat Akhmetov. As was the case with other

¹ For example, Rinat Akhmetov would have been a very young man when the Soviet Union collapsed, but he was a protégé of a powerful mafia boss in the region, Akhat Bragin, eventually succeeding him following Bragin's mysterious assassination.

members of the post-Soviet economic elite, the 1990s propelled Akhmetov onto the scene after having initially gained a foothold in the Donetsk business scene through favorable insider connections. Like most of the other oligarchs in the other regions, Akhmetov began cultivating the loyalty of Donetsk residents in particular with investments across the region and via his regional enterprises, which employed hundreds of thousands of people. Having risen to the top in the Donbas, occupying a position to steer most of the political and socio-economic developments in the region, Akhmetov eventually extended his influence to the national level and provided strong backing for regional politicians such as Viktor Yanukovich and his Party of Regions.

With regards to the 2014 events, following Yanukovich's loss of power, powerful regional tycoons, such as Akhmetov, were the only power keepers with the necessary resources that could impact the trajectory of short-term regional socio-political developments. However, **unlike oligarchs in regions such as Kharkiv or Dnipropetrovsk, Akhmetov and those concentrated in the heavy industry and extractive sector in Donetsk that supported Yanukovich used the separatist protests as a way to pressure Kyiv for more regional autonomy**, as opposed to taking concrete action to prevent the events from escalating during the crucial stages of the rebellion. To that end, in the Donbas, the most prominent members of the economic elite allowed the successful organization of separatist rebellions through means such as their control over thousands of workers, local political officials, and, to an extent, the regional police and security forces. This ultimately put oligarchs such as Akhmetov in a prime position to shape the protest events from the very beginning.

Although direct examples are rare, explicit public statements sympathizing with the anti-Euromaidan protesters are available online. For example, Akhmetov made several statements expressing his support for those who protested for more decentralization in 2014 and for their right to speak Russian language (YouTube 2014), which, as discussed earlier, has historically been an issue that has triggered protests and fuelled regional divisions between the east and the west of the country. Additionally, indications also exist in academic research (Wilson, 2014) that Akhmetov actively tried to manage the protest at the beginning by “financing pro-Russian protests to make them appear a credible threat and using them as a bargaining chip for more concessions [and] his clientelistic network also attempted to manage people's fears in order to mobilize support against Kyiv” (Nitsova, 2021). All of these indicators underline the overarching point that, at least up until the 2022 invasion, Ukraine was more or less a captured state whereby top domestic policy decisions were heavily steered by the oligarchs via the political actors that they had put into positions of power.

The likely future of Ukraine's oligarchs following the 2022 war

The 2022 war has, in many ways, emboldened Zelensky's government to push ahead with the initiatives that he pledged to undertake since taking over as president, most notably the promise to curb the influence of the oligarchs over the state. Prior to the invasion, despite signing into law the so-called anti-oligarch bill² in November 2021, efforts to implement it were virtually non-existent. However, following Kyiv's receiving an EU candidate member status, in July 2022 Ukraine's Security and Defense Council was tasked with creating a formal register of who classifies as an oligarch, with about 86 Ukrainian elites reportedly likely to be featured on this list (Yarmolenko, 2022). Whilst the continuation of this effort will inevitably be challenged by the war and how it progresses, there are several indicators already to suggest that the future of Ukraine's business elites is likely to be profoundly different from that of the pre-2022 war times.

Firstly, in an unprecedented move, in a bid to decrease the chances of being included on the list and comply with the changing regulations, **Akhmetov announced that his main investment company System Capital Management (SCM) will exit from its immense media business and transfer its licenses to the Ukrainian state** (Reuters, 2022). The development, which Akhmetov described as "involuntary", represented the first major step in the country's independent history that undermined one of the most influential means through which the oligarchs have historically projected their influence. For example, the media landscape in Ukraine has notoriously been dominated by the oligarchs, with television – by far the most popular source of news consumption in the country – dominated by a few business groups (Porzgen, 2016, p. 12). Thus, by curbing their ability to disseminate information that would serve their personal interests, the opportunities for the oligarchs to continue shaping public opinion in Ukraine are likely to diminish in the years ahead.

Next, in another bold move, also in July 2022, President Zelensky decisively broke ties with Ihor Kolomoisky, by, reportedly, stripping the oligarch of his Ukrainian citizenship (Aris, 2022). The decision represented a major step from Zelensky, who was previously strongly criticized for his purported links to the oligarch, as Kolomoisky is widely suspected of having helped elect Zelensky as president in 2019. Further similar legislative initiatives and attempts to establish control over the economic actors are likely in Ukraine moving forward as Zelensky continues to remain determined to bring Ukraine closer to the EU.

Second, **the sheer magnitude of physical destruction of the war on assets – especially in eastern Ukraine, Akhmetov's home base, is yet another crucial factor that has already resulted in the**

² The law essentially prohibited the oligarchs from financing political parties, advertisements as well as demonstrations and excluded them from participating in potential future privatizations of state assets.

loss of economic power of these actors. The destructive impact of the war on Akhmetov's industrial base in the east has meant that the oligarch saw his economic power fall by USD 4.3 billion since the start of the invasion (Tognini, 2022). Akhmetov had since filed a lawsuit with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) against Russia, seeking compensation for the destruction of his assets. It is highly unlikely that he will be able to recover these losses, which have led not only to the destruction of the physical assets, but also of the local political and employment forces that the oligarch had previously controlled.

Whether Ukraine will be able to continue seizing on the momentum and pushing ahead with implementing the anti-corruption and anti-oligarch initiatives remains to be seen, but there is no question that the war has had a transformative impact on society. Much will also depend on whether Zelensky and the current Ukrainian government manage to survive the war in the year(s) ahead, but a complete reversal of the current policies and trends is highly unlikely in the short term and there is no question that the entire concept of oligarchs, as Ukraine has known, is already being strongly tested.

Conclusion

The 2022 war has set in train an enormity of social, economic and political change. Unlike in 2014, the visibility of Ukraine's regional divisions has been significantly reduced, with the country uniting around even some of the most historically divisive subjects such as its geopolitical orientation and the pursuit of membership in the EU and NATO.

Moreover, the war has also transformed the country's political fault lines, which, with the election of Zelensky, had already begun to show signs of healing. Whether the war will have a lasting impact on reshaping Ukraine's linguistic divisions remains to be seen, but there is no question that the war coalesced the public around Ukrainian identity and will likely only encourage the learning and usage of Ukrainian language moving forward.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the war has provided the impetus to the government to push through with anti-corruption reforms that have historically been obstructed by the oligarchs. Backed by the unprecedented public mandate and in a bid to prove to the West that Kyiv is serious about its European future, President Zelensky began taking bold steps to curb the influence of pro-Russian political and destructive economic forces in the country.

Ultimately, amid the darkness brought about by the 2022 war, opportunities and glimmers of hope for Ukraine to rebuild as a more unified and democratic country in the future have emerged on the horizon.

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