



RETHINKING UKRAINE'S GEOPOLITICS: THE FAILURE OF INTER-MEDIATION AND THE ORIGINS OF WAR

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Abstract

The Russia–Ukraine war stands as one of the most consequential geopolitical conflicts of the 21st century, raising fundamental questions about the relationship between geography, power, and conflict in the post–Cold War international order. Tensions between Russia and Western powers have intensified during the conflict, and more than three years after the outbreak of the war, its outcome remains uncertain. The paper analyzes Ukraine's geopolitical position as a key factor shaping the origins and dynamics of the ongoing war. Particular attention is given to Ukraine's evolving relations with Russia and with Western actors, primarily the United States and the European Union. Ukraine has long occupied a central place not only in Russia's geopolitical and geostrategic designs, but also in Russian history and identity. Yet after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine began to develop closer political and economic ties with Western institutions, following a trajectory similar to that of several former Eastern Bloc states. This article argues that Ukraine's geopolitical position is best understood not as a buffer, but as a failed intermediary space, in which competing integration projects (Euro-Atlantic and Russian) have eroded the conditions necessary for neutrality, transforming structural in-betweenness into a catalyst for war.

Keywords: *Russia–Ukraine war, Ukraine, geopolitics, post-Soviet transition, buffer state, bridge state.*

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Introduction

The war in Ukraine emerged not from its role as a buffer, but from the collapse of its intermediary position between rival geopolitical orders, which transformed structural in-betweenness into a driver of conflict. A state's geopolitical status—and its capacity to shape world politics—is largely determined by its geographical location, available resources, historical legacy, and political structures. While some countries successfully leverage these elements to exert global influence, others face structural constraints that limit their agency and often leave them vulnerable to historical and contemporary conflicts. By examining Ukraine's geopolitical status, this paper seeks to explain the geopolitical factors that contributed to the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war.

The complex historical development of Ukraine is briefly introduced to trace the evolution of its geopolitical status. The latter has changed dramatically in the last few decades, particularly since Ukraine gained independence in 1991. Both its territorial configuration and demographic composition have undergone significant changes, and Ukraine has slowly become a buffer state between the West and the East. Alongside this characterization,¹ alternative interpretations of Ukraine's geopolitical role will also be discussed, as the country's geographical position allows for multiple categorizations. Ukraine's position between the East and the West has created a persistent strategic dilemma, as closer alignment with one side often risks antagonizing the other. The paper argues that Ukraine's geopolitical position did not merely render it a passive “buffer state,” but structurally embedded it in a persistent security dilemma between Russia and the West, in which geographical exposure amplified mutual threat perceptions and made conflict escalation increasingly likely after 2014. While classical geopolitical theories correctly identify Ukraine's strategic centrality, they fail to explain the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war. This article argues that geography alone is insufficient and that conflict emerged from the interaction between structural positioning and incompatible political integration projects that eliminated the viability of neutrality. The article concludes by outlining several possible scenarios regarding Ukraine's postwar status. Although the end of the war remains uncertain, Ukraine's evolving geopolitical status will play a crucial role in shaping the future dynamics of Eurasian geopolitics.

¹ Krisztián Jójárt, “Russia's Security Perception of NATO,” in *NATO Today*, ed. Zoltán Szenes (Budapest: Zrínyi, 2021), 78–80, in Hungarian: [Jójárt Krisztián, „Oroszország biztonsági percepciója a NATO-ról,” in *A mai NATO*, szerk. Szenes Zoltán (Budapest: Zrínyi Kiadó, 2021), 78–80.]

By reconceptualizing Ukraine as a failed intermediary space rather than a stable buffer, this article seeks to contribute to broader debates on geopolitics and international conflict. It highlights the limits of traditional spatial categories and underscores the need to account for the dynamic interaction between geography, power, and political choice in explaining contemporary wars.

Historical Evolution of Ukraine's Geopolitical Position

Ukraine's territorial and political configuration has undergone numerous transformations throughout its history, culminating in the establishment of an independent state in 1991. For the purposes of this analysis, the key developments in Ukrainian history are divided into three broad stages in relation to the country's relationship with the Soviet Union: the pre-Soviet era, the period during which Ukraine functioned as a republic of the Soviet Union, and the post-Soviet era. The existing literature generally identifies the Soviet period as one of the most decisive phases in Ukraine's historical development. Consequently, the country's political and geopolitical evolution can reasonably be examined with particular attention to this era. While this study acknowledges the most important developments of earlier historical stages, its primary focus lies on the decades surrounding the Soviet period.

Pre-Soviet era: Many of the most significant territorial and political changes took place during this period. Kyivan (Kievan) Rus, often regarded as the first East Slavic state and as a historical predecessor of several East Slavic polities, played a significant role in the region's cultural, political, and national development. In the following few centuries, Ukrainian territories were divided among several political powers, including Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, Moldova (Moldavia), the Mongols, the Ottoman Empire, and the Cossacks. On the one hand, Ukrainians were influenced by European ideas; on the other hand, they struggled to consolidate their national identity. Elements of this historical duality continue to shape Ukrainian identity even today.

The Cossack period was another decisive phase in Ukrainian history. During the seventeenth century, this community contributed significantly to the Ukrainian nation-building process, helping lay the foundations of modern Ukraine. Later, in the nineteenth century, Ukrainian territories were incorporated into the Habsburg and Romanov Empires, which, rather than holding back Ukrainian development, contributed to processes of cultural and national revival. At this time, efforts were made to preserve elements of Ukrainian cultural heritage, while the political, so-

cial, and economic spheres underwent modernization.² By the end of the eighteenth century, the Russian Empire had become the dominant power in the region following the annexation of Crimea and southern Ukrainian territories. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ukraine's vast steppe regions and fertile black-earth soils made the country a popular destination for peasant migration. Heavy industrialization also started during this period, resulting in waves of urbanization. The country became an industrial and agricultural powerhouse, and in many major cities, Russians constituted a significant share of the population.

Ukraine had an ethnically and religiously diverse population. From the early twentieth century onward, especially after the founding of the first Ukrainian political party, the principal political goal became independence. The opportunity to pursue this goal emerged after World War I. In 1917, the Ukrainian People's Republic was proclaimed within a federated Russian state, and full independence was declared in January 1918. The war left Ukraine with a declining economy, diminished population, and the unresolved question of nationalities. The collapse of European empires created an opportunity for Ukraine to emerge as an independent political actor in Europe and pursue the clear goal of independence.³ In 1919, most of Ukraine's territory became part of the Ukrainian SSR, which became a constituent republic of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1922.⁴

Soviet era: During the Soviet period, territorial changes were less extensive than in the previous period, although in the middle of the twentieth century, the last major territorial realignment of Soviet Ukraine took place. After World War II, Soviet Ukraine incorporated territories that had previously belonged to Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia, completing the modern territorial configuration of the republic. The process was finalized in 1954, when the Soviet leadership transferred the Crimean Peninsula from the Russian SFSR to the Ukrainian SSR.⁵

Despite some opportunities for development, such as expanded access to higher education and economic growth, Soviet rule imposed severe political, social, and economic constraints on Ukraine. This country historically possessed a strong agricultural base and was often referred to as the "breadbasket of Europe,"

² Valerii Smoly, "Specific Features of Historical Evolution," in *Ukraine in Maps*, ed. Károly Kocsis, Leonid Rudenko, and Ferenc Schweitzer (Budapest: Geographical Institute, 2008), 19–24, https://hungarian-geography.hu/konyvtar/Ukraine/Ukraine_in_maps_Specific_features_of_historical_evolution.pdf.

³ Serhii Plokhyy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 60–226.

⁴ EmperorTigerstar, "The History of Ukraine: Every Year," YouTube video, April 24, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-b5w5qc_VY.

⁵ Plokhyy, *Gates of Europe*, 298.

but during the Soviet era, agriculture was increasingly subordinated to heavy industrialization. The country underwent a remarkable industrial development, but, as in other communist states, this process hindered the agricultural sector. Forced collectivization, grain requisitioning, and broader Soviet policies contributed to the famine of 1932–1933, known as the Holodomor. This tragedy was accompanied by widespread repression and persecution.⁶

Ukraine was also one of the major sites of the Holocaust, during which at least 1.5 million Jews were killed on its territory. After Stalin died in 1953, de-Stalinization created somewhat greater space for cultural expression and limited forms of national revival in Soviet Ukraine. Nevertheless, Soviet Ukraine continued to face difficulties like Russification or Sovietization, economic deterioration, decline of industrial and agricultural production, and even a nuclear accident in 1986. By the end of this era, under Gorbachev's rule, a new opportunity for national revival had emerged. After Gorbachev's reforms, Ukraine prioritized the defense of national culture and language.⁷ This process contributed to the declaration of state sovereignty in 1990. It ultimately resulted in the confirmation of full independence by referendum in 1991.⁸

Post-Soviet era: After finally gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine continued to face serious political, economic, and institutional challenges. Independence created an opportunity for Ukraine to define its own political course, but this process proved costly and difficult. The state had a great opportunity for development, but consolidating democracy and building a resilient state apparatus proved challenging. Internal power struggles and the growing influence of regional elites in politics gradually consolidated the oligarchic nature of Ukraine's political system. Democratic deficits, rule-of-law problems, and economic difficulties hindered state development. At different times, the political leadership pursued either a pro-European or a pro-Russian orientation, making consistent state development difficult.

During the 1990s, Ukraine took steps towards the West. It joined the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, signed a cooperation agreement with the European Union (EU), and joined the Partnership for Peace program organized by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).⁹ Closer alignment with Russia lacked broad support in Ukrainian society, and this discontent was expressed during the revolutions

⁶ Oksana Vynnyk, "Professional Ethics, Medical Experts and the Famine of 1932–1933 in Soviet Ukraine," *Journal of Genocide Research* 26, no. 3 (2024): 265.

⁷ Plokyh, *Gates of Europe*, 245–325.

⁸ Laura Blaj, "Ukraine's Independence and Its Geostrategic Impact in Eastern Europe," *Debatte: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 21, no. 2–3 (2013): 165–81.

⁹ Plokyh, *Gates of Europe*, 325–28.

in 2004 and 2014. These events served as catalysts for democratic transformation, and since 2014, Ukraine has been committed to European integration. This foreign policy orientation was viewed negatively by Russia, which annexed Crimea in 2014 and launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.¹⁰

This summary highlights that large parts of present-day Ukraine were under foreign rule for extended periods and were inhabited by diverse ethnic communities. Russian influence remained significant in the region, including through sizable Russian-speaking populations, particularly in eastern and southern Ukraine. These factors contributed to long-term tensions in the region, which eventually culminated in the armed conflict that continues today. In the next section, the importance and geopolitical background of these territories are examined to explore why these territories have become objects of intense geopolitical contestation.

Geographical Reasons: Country in the Pivot

Ukraine's troubled history and nation-building process can be explained in large part by geographical and geopolitical factors. Being situated essentially in the center of Eurasia with access to the Black Sea, the country holds a special geostrategic position. This means that it is situated at the crossroads of economic and commercial arteries between East and West, North and South. Because of its strategically valuable position, Ukraine repeatedly became an object of geopolitical competition among neighboring powers. Although Ukraine repeatedly resisted external domination and developed its own political and national traditions, it often remained vulnerable to the power struggles of larger states.¹¹

To clarify the analytical framework of this study, it is necessary to introduce the foundations of geopolitical thought. The most significant theories of geopolitics were developed more than a hundred years ago, but they are still relevant today.

Friedrich Ratzel's *Lebensraum* theory¹² helps explain the great powers' interest in the territory of Ukraine. He associated the state with a living creature that needs to possess essential territories. Ratzel considered the annexation of smaller and weaker states by greater powers a natural process. According to Rudolf Kjellén, another influential geopolitical thinker associated with organic theories of the state, conflicts of interest between great powers tend to intensify into open confron-

¹⁰ Daria Synhaievskia, "Ukraine's Political Transformation: A Journey from Independence to the Present Day," *UkraineWorld*, 2024, <https://ukraineworld.org/en/articles/analysis/ukraines-political-transformation>.

¹¹ Smoly, "Specific Features of Historical Evolution," 19–24.

¹² Athanasios Stogiannos, *The Genesis of Geopolitics and Friedrich Ratzel: Dismissing the Myth of the Ratzelian Geodeterminism* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 57–65.

tation.¹³ From this perspective, the conflict in Ukraine reflects a geopolitical struggle between Russia and the West, with Ukraine positioned as a frontier between competing spheres of influence.

Alfred Thayer Mahan developed a framework identifying the criteria that a state should fulfil to become a world power. These criteria include geographical location, physical structure, territorial extent, population size, national character, and governmental and institutional characteristics. Mahan attached importance to a state's access to the sea and whether it is able to become a sea power. He emphasized that favorable geographical conditions alone are insufficient; a state also requires durable political and institutional capacity to become a major power.¹⁴

This point is also relevant to Ukraine, which possesses favorable geographical conditions, but has always lacked a proper and stable political order. Frequent political alterations, which were often accompanied by a foreign power's influence, did not allow space for the stabilization of the country's political system, especially of democracy. In terms of size and demographic potential, Ukraine ranks among the most important states in Europe. Its territory exceeds 600,000 square kilometers, and even with losing control over some of its Eastern and Southern regions, it remains one of the largest countries in Europe. Population data are more difficult to assess with precision, particularly while the war is ongoing. Before the outbreak of the war, around 44 million people lived in Ukraine; in 2025, its population is estimated to be around 35 million. Although the long-term demographic consequences of the war remain uncertain, Ukraine remains one of the largest states in Europe in territorial and strategic terms.¹⁵

Halford Mackinder's framework is also useful for understanding Ukraine's geographical and strategic position. He divided the world into three areas: the Heartland, the pivot area of northeastern and central Eurasia; the inner crescent, comprising the remaining Eurasian and North African territories; and the outer crescent, consisting of all remaining oceanic countries. In Mackinder's view, Eastern Europe is the key region whose buffer zones served as a geopolitical gateway between East and West. It is important, in his view, to maintain the balance of power, which can easily be disrupted if one power wishes to extend its influence.

¹³ Péter Klemensits, "The Role of Eurasia in Classical Geopolitical Theories," Eurasia Center, March 4, 2021, <https://eurasiacenter.hu/2021/02/17/eurazsia-szerepe-a-klasszikus-geopolitikai-elmeletekben/>, in Hungarian: [Péter Klemensits, "Eurázsia szerepe a klasszikus geopolitikai elméletekben," Eurázsia Központ, March 4, 2021, <https://eurasiacenter.hu/2021/02/17/eurazsia-szerepe-a-klasszikus-geopolitikai-elmeletekben/>].

¹⁴ Klemensits, "Role of Eurasia."

¹⁵ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Population Prospects 2024: Summary of Results* (New York: United Nations, 2024), 56, https://population.un.org/wpp/assets/Files/WPP2024_Summary-of-Results.pdf.

Even though only a small part of Ukraine falls within Mackinder's Heartland, influence over Ukraine remains strategically important for the major powers. Ukraine possesses substantial economic and demographic potential. Control over its territory would provide access to the Black Sea, fertile agricultural land, substantial natural and industrial resources, and important human and military assets.¹⁶ If the war ends with a peace treaty drawing new borderlines alongside the current front lines, Russia would retain substantial strategic, economic, and military advantages. By annexing Crimea, it secured control over access to the Black Sea and an important naval base in Sevastopol.¹⁷ Furthermore, control over occupied Ukrainian territories would provide Russia with access to valuable mineral resources, industrial assets, and fertile agricultural land.

Karl Haushofer proposed another way of conceptualizing the world through his theory of pan-regions. In this model, each region was to be organized around a dominant state possessing sufficient *Lebensraum*, resources, population, and access to the sea. The regions were Pan-America, led by the United States; Pan-Europe or Eurafrika, led by Germany; Pan-Russia, led by Russia; and Pan-Asia, led by Japan. Haushofer also suggested that satellite states should be located on the peripheries of these regions.¹⁸ Although this theory belongs to an earlier geopolitical era, its regional logic remains analytically relevant, even if the dominant powers identified by Haushofer have changed. A broad East–West division remains visible today, with Russia and the US acting as key competing powers. At the same time, Ukraine occupies a precarious position on the boundary between rival geopolitical spaces.

Nicholas J. Spykman's theory is also relevant, as he revised several of the assumptions advanced by earlier geopolitical thinkers.¹⁹ He developed his own geopolitical interpretation of the world map, drawing in part on Mackinder's Heartland theory. Like Mackinder, Spykman referred to the pivot area as the Heartland, a Central Eurasian region dominated by Russia, extending into parts of Ukraine.

In Spykman's framework, influence over the Rimland, the zone between central Eurasia and the surrounding oceans, represents the principal strategic objective of great powers.²⁰ States situated in this area are commonly regarded as buffer

¹⁶ H. J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1904): 421–37.

¹⁷ István Szilágyi, "Russian Geopolitical Thinking: An Overview," *Geopolitikai Szemle* 1, no. 1 (2019): 9–39, in Hungarian: [István Szilágyi, "Az orosz geopolitikai gondolkodás: Áttekintés," *Geopolitikai Szemle* 1, no. 1 (2019): 9–39].

¹⁸ Karl Haushofer, *Geopolitics of the Pan-Ideas* (Berlin: Zentral-Verlag, 1931), 7–26, in German: [Karl Haushofer, *Geopolitik der Pan-Ideen* (Berlin: Zentral-Verlag, 1931), 7–26].

¹⁹ Nicholas John Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1944), 35–41.

²⁰ Klemensits, "Role of Eurasia."

states between land and sea powers. From this perspective, Ukraine occupies a frontier position between the Heartland and the peripheral regions. This geopolitical location, coupled with internal instability, created favorable conditions for external power rivalry and further intensified the country's internal instability.

Zbigniew Brzezinski also emphasized Ukraine's strategic importance in his analysis of Eurasian geopolitics. He regarded Eurasia as the central geopolitical arena and argued that losing Ukraine would severely constrain Russia's geopolitical reach. Without Ukraine, any attempt to rebuild an empire and rule Eurasia would lead to Russia's isolation. Even if Russia regarded Ukraine as a country of its 'near abroad,' it lacked the political and economic power to influence its neighboring countries. Russian pressure on these states often encouraged them to seek alternative partners, particularly in the West. According to Brzezinski, Ukraine has a decisive role in the relationship between Russia and Europe. In this view, if Ukraine is to preserve its independence, it should be a part of the European community. Ukrainian membership in the EU or NATO would be deeply problematic from Russia's perspective while simultaneously implying closer political and institutional integration with Europe.²¹ Under such conditions, Ukraine could in principle function as a bridge between East and West, although this prospect appears highly remote under present circumstances.

What these theories share is their emphasis on the geopolitical importance of Eurasia and on the role of surrounding powers in balancing influence over its central spaces. The balance between these powers is quite fragile; if any of them attempts to extend its territory or influence, the clash of interests can easily lead to war. A similar geopolitical logic can be observed in the Russia-Ukraine war. Western actors, corresponding broadly to the peripheral and Rimland powers described in classical geopolitics, supported Ukraine's movement toward European integration, a development that conflicted with Russian interests. Ukraine's prolonged position between these competing orientations intensified geopolitical tensions and contributed to the outbreak of war.

Ukraine Between East and West: Competing Models of Statehood

Ukraine has pursued nearly every major orientation in its foreign relations, yet none of them has proved to be fully successful. At different times, the country was led by pro-Russian elites, pursued neutrality, or favored Euro-Atlantic integration. Ukraine's position should not be reduced to indecision, since at each stage one major external actor remained dissatisfied with the country's chosen direction. Con-

²¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 87–123.

stant pressure from both East and West, combined with attempts to maneuver between them, left Ukraine with limited room for autonomous state-building and the full consolidation of sovereignty. As the historical overview suggests, Ukraine's political and diplomatic objectives were changing over time. This section examines how Ukraine got into this situation and how maneuvering worked in practice.

For historical reasons mentioned above, Russia regards Ukraine as a country belonging to its 'near abroad,' which means that it occupies a prominent place in Russia's sphere of influence. With the emergence and gradual expansion of the European Union, Ukraine also came to occupy an increasingly important place in the West's strategic horizon, finding itself on the frontier between the two sides. For a while, Ukraine tried to pursue a balanced foreign policy, but without a stable internal foundation, such a strategy has not proved successful in the long term.²² The unresolved question of Ukraine's geopolitical alignment caused tension and a security dilemma, which is one of the *casus belli* of the ongoing war. Beyond the clash between Russian and Ukrainian nationalisms, the broader conflict of interests between East and West also contributed to the escalation of the crisis.

There are competing interpretations of the war's underlying causes. While the West blames Russian imperial ambitions, Russia explains its attack by portraying NATO's further eastern expansion as an existential threat. Enhancing security has always been the key objective of joining a military alliance, but for states like Ukraine, it may have led to a completely different effect. Instead of increasing security, it can heighten the risk of war, as the Ukrainian case illustrates.²³ Tensions surrounding NATO enlargement had been building since the 1990s. From the Russian perspective, Western support for Ukraine appeared to signal an effort to consolidate influence on Russia's border. Later, Putin viewed the 2008 promise of eventual NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine as a direct threat, a perception that contributed to rising tensions and later crises in the post-Soviet space, including the annexation of Crimea. John J. Mearsheimer suggested in his 2014 work that the West should stop westernizing Ukraine and instead seek to preserve it as a

²² Rita Fekete, "What Is the Geopolitical Cause of the Russia-Ukraine War? – Ágnes Bernek," YouTube video, July 20, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3gF66_h7y4, in Hungarian: [Rita Fekete, "Mi az orosz-ukrán háború geopolitikai oka? - Bernek Ágnes," YouTube video, July 20, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3gF66_h7y4].

²³ Gergely Varga, "The Geopolitics and Tragedy of the War in Ukraine," Danube Institute, January 2025, 2–5, <https://danubeinstitute.hu/hu/kutatas/the-geopolitics-and-tragedy-of-the-war-in-ukraine>.

neutral buffer.²⁴ This is only one of several categorizations that have been applied to Ukraine in an attempt to describe its geopolitical status.

One frequently cited, though debated, claim is that Ukraine's name means "borderland." In addition, there are many different ways to describe the form of this country, some suggesting that Ukraine lacks sovereignty and more or less depends on another entity, while others highlight the country's role as a frontier. Historical experience suggests that Ukraine has repeatedly been interpreted through such classifications, and sooner or later, it must find one with which it can identify to achieve long-lasting peace.

The first category to consider is that of the *satellite state*,²⁵ in which a nation is independent but heavily influenced or even controlled by a more powerful country in political, economic, and military terms. Haushofer also mentioned this type of state in his theory. He argued that great powers of the pan-regions are surrounded by satellite states on the periphery. This form of state typically exists in the context of larger empires or spheres of influence where the dominant power limits the satellite's autonomy. In Ukraine's case, this role can be traced back to the period after World War I, when Bolshevik power, with the support of local communists, incorporated Soviet Ukraine into a broader system dominated by Moscow.²⁶ This dynamic characterized their relationship during the Cold War, and in the event of a Russian victory in the ongoing war, Ukraine could once again be reduced to this status.

After analyzing Ukraine's history, geopolitical status, and relationships, there is another suitable and often used term for determining the country's status, which is the form of a *buffer state*. Such a state is formally independent, influenced but not fully controlled by any of the powers between which it is situated. It maintains workable relations with both parties, as Ukraine has tried to do for years. This type was also mentioned earlier by Mackinder, who considered states of Eastern Europe as buffer states between East and West, forming a geopolitical gateway. This status derives from the country's geopolitical position and can be maintained in the long term if the surrounding great powers can reconcile their interests.

²⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (September/October 2014): 77–89, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24483306>.

²⁵ "Satellite States - (Honors World History) - Vocab, Definition, Explanations," Fiveable, <https://library.fiveable.me/key-terms/hs-honors-world-history/satellite-states>.

²⁶ Stephan Rindlisbacher, "The Territory of Ukraine and Its History," in *Ukraine's Many Faces: Land, People, and Culture Revisited*, ed. Olena Palko and Manuel F  rez Gil (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2023), 165–74, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839466643-019>.

When Ukraine abandoned its balancing policy and committed itself to Euro-Atlantic integration, Russia felt threatened and sought to pull the country back into its orbit through force.²⁷ Internal divisions within the country often reinforce its buffer-state condition. In Ukraine's case, this means a division between pro-Russian and pro-European orientations. Ethnic and religious divisions are also visible, as they cause constant tension. Without a stable base, there is a higher chance for foreign influence, and in Ukraine's case, it means getting stuck between two powerful entities' spheres of interest. If Ukraine succeeds in building a strong economy and a stable political and social order, it may eventually move beyond this status and instead become a link between East and West.²⁸

A milder variation of the buffer-state concept is the notion of the frontier state. As noted earlier, Ukraine is on the edge of competing spheres of influence, which allows it to be called a frontier. After the end of the war, this status is unlikely to change. Whichever side it moves closer to, the country is likely to retain this role as the frontier of the broader alignment it joins.²⁹

In 2014, Henry Kissinger proposed what might be considered an ideal role for Ukraine, arguing that its future should not be determined by exclusive alignment with either East or West. It must not be either side's outpost against the other, but rather function as a bridge between them. For this, a real agreement needs to be reached between East and West. With such cooperation, Ukraine could reemerge as an important connecting space in world politics and the global economy at a key Eurasian crossroads. From this perspective, Russia should stop pushing Ukraine back into a satellite status and let it find its own place in world politics. Meanwhile, the West should recognize that from Russia's perspective, Ukraine has never been viewed as merely a foreign country, since Ukraine was an integral part of Russian history and, indeed, Russia.³⁰

The mentioned forms of state can help clarify Ukraine's situation. These categories range from the least to the most favorable scenario, and because the outcome of the war remains uncertain, Ukraine may yet move toward any of them, with major consequences for its future geopolitical status.

²⁷ Sven Biscop, "From Buffer to Frontier: Ukraine and the EU," Egmont Policy Brief 298 (February 2023): 1–2, https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2023/02/Sven-Biscop_Policy_Brief_298.pdf.

²⁸ Fekete, "What Is the Geopolitical Cause."

²⁹ Biscop, "From Buffer to Frontier," 2.

³⁰ Henry A. Kissinger, "How the Ukraine Crisis Ends," *Washington Post*, March 5, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/henry-kissinger-to-settle-the-ukraine-crisis-start-at-the-end/2014/03/05/46dad868-a496-11e3-8466-d34c451760b9_story.html.

Possible Scenarios for Ukraine's Geopolitical Status

Although geopolitical transformations may appear less dynamic than in earlier decades, several territories remain in contested or uncertain status, including parts of Ukraine. As discussed above, Ukraine was unable to consolidate its independence for long, as both internal and external power struggles soon reemerged. The fact that the country's geopolitical position will remain significant is unlikely to change, although its future role and status remain uncertain. This section outlines three possible scenarios, supported by comparative examples, in order to illustrate the potential paths Ukraine may take.

NATO membership: One of Ukraine's main goals is membership in the Euro-Atlantic military alliance, which would provide security guarantees under Article 5. Although the country's movement toward NATO is often treated by Russia as a major cause of conflict, membership could nonetheless be presented as a long-term solution to the war. This contingency can be compared to the situation of reunified Germany, when in 1990 the former German Democratic Republic became a member of the alliance after unification. That settlement was embedded in a broader security framework negotiated among the major powers, rather than in a context of ongoing war.

In Ukraine's case, a comparable arrangement would require credible and mutually accepted security guarantees. After the war ends, Ukrainians will surely be weakened and traumatized, but many will retain combat experience, access to weapons, and strong motivations shaped by the violence of the conflict. Therefore, Russia could be a target of sabotage, guerrilla warfare, and cyberattacks, which could be avoided with robust postwar security arrangements. Without acceptable security guarantees, Russia is unlikely to accept Ukraine's NATO membership, which is necessary to avoid future confrontation between NATO and Russia or Russia and Ukraine. Currently, Russia's demands include restrictions on foreign troop deployments and limits on the arming of Ukraine. Reunified Germany was in a better position in 1990 because it was not part of an ongoing conflict and its borders were settled. For Ukraine, any path toward NATO membership would require far clearer territorial and security conditions.³¹ Ukraine's accession to NATO could also generate tension among current member states because of burden sharing. In this case, an alternative arrangement could involve bilateral or multilateral security agreements with countries willing to assist Ukraine in the event of renewed conflict. The final settlement on Germany in 1990 fixed its borders and created a nego-

³¹ Eric Ciaramella and Eric Green, "Ukraine, NATO, and War Termination," Council on Foreign Relations, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/report/ukraine-nato-and-war-termination>.

tiated international framework for its status, which makes the comparison to Ukraine imperfect.

Neutrality, non-bloc status: After Ukraine's independence, neutrality was on the table for a short period of time, but power struggles gradually pushed Kyiv to swing between East and West, creating a security vacuum. The war has already had serious consequences for Ukraine; after a ceasefire or peace agreement, it will not be able to carry out reconstruction on its own. Neutrality may serve as an intermediate arrangement for the country before it commits itself permanently to one side, in light of the end of the war. For many years, Finland was treated as the classic model of neutrality, having maintained its independence and sovereignty while becoming a widely admired society in the eyes of the international community.³² After the escalation in 2014, Brzezinski proposed the Finnish model for Ukraine. In his opinion, a form of Finlandization would have been the most acceptable compromise for all parties. The model presupposes stable neighborly relations, prosperous economic cooperation with both Russia and the EU, refusal to join military alliances viewed as threatening by Russia, and closer cooperation with Europe in non-military spheres.³³ Although Finland abandoned its long-standing non-alignment by joining NATO in 2023, the so-called Finlandization can still serve as an example for a potential postwar status. In 1948, Finland signed a treaty with the Soviet Union under which it retained sovereignty while remaining outside hostile military blocs (NATO or the Warsaw Pact). In practice, however, the Soviet Union continued to exercise significant influence over the country during the Cold War. Even so, Finland was able to achieve a high level of political and economic development.³⁴

Ukraine is in a far more complex situation now than Finland was during the Cold War. This model may sound highly idealized in light of Ukraine's current condition; nevertheless, seeking the role of a neutral buffer may still serve as a possible strategic objective. The scenario of neutrality could be implemented through the United Nations (UN), where most of the interested parties could participate in shaping a final agreement regarding Ukraine's status.

Russian influence: In this case, Russia would have to achieve a breakthrough at the front lines, seize more Ukrainian territories, and cause serious damage to the

³² Eugene Rumer, "Neutrality: An Alternative to Ukraine's Membership in NATO," Council on Foreign Relations, January 7, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/article/neutrality-alternative-ukraines-membership-nato>.

³³ Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Russia Needs to Be Offered a 'Finland Option' for Ukraine," *Financial Times*, February 23, 2014, <https://www.ft.com/content/e855408c-9bf6-11e3-afe3-00144feab7de>.

³⁴ The Economist, "What Is 'Finlandisation'?" *The Economist*, February 11, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/02/11/what-is-finlandisation>.

country, forcing it to capitulate. If Ukraine were to surrender, Russia would effectively dictate the terms of peace. Some experts compare this scenario to Georgia, whose recent political trajectory has involved a relative distancing from the EU alongside a more accommodating posture toward Russia. This would likely mean the effective closure of Ukraine's EU accession path and probably the suspension of American and EU financial support. However, without firm integration into Western security and political structures, and while falling into Russia's shadow, Ukraine would face the risk of slowly drifting into a geopolitical gray zone. The war could thus end in a coercive or unstable settlement that weakens Ukraine's Western integration over time.³⁵

To gain a clearer sense of which scenario is more likely to occur, it is necessary to consider recent developments and the current positions of the parties involved. Taking these into account, each side has red lines and remains unwilling to compromise on them. The most divisive issues in any possible agreement are likely to be territorial changes and postwar security guarantees. These questions will almost certainly reshape broader geopolitical dynamics and affect the international community as a whole. On these issues, the red lines of the parties sharply conflict, and a workable compromise remains difficult to envisage for now. Despite the leaders' recently expressed willingness to cooperate, each side continues to advance its own vision of peace and a set of conditions it is not prepared to abandon. Russia, above all, seeks international legal recognition of its control over the occupied regions and their incorporation into the Russian Federation. Regarding security guarantees, Russia demands the demilitarization of Ukraine and formal assurances that the country will neither possess nor host nuclear weapons or related technology. Ukrainian NATO membership is also unacceptable to the Russian side, although Moscow has generally shown less hostility to Ukraine's EU accession. The Kremlin explains this by pointing to the different functions of the two organizations. It presents the EU primarily as an economic integration project and has stated that Ukraine has the sovereign right to pursue accession. In the long term, some Russian reasoning even suggests that Ukraine's EU membership could be useful if it were to contribute to internal strains within the Union. By contrast, join-

³⁵ JPMorganChase Center for Geopolitics, "The Russia-Ukraine Endgame and the Future of Europe," May 2025, 1–6, <https://www.jpmorganchase.com/content/dam/jpmorganchase/documents/center-for-geopolitics/jpmc-cfg-russia-ukraine.pdf>.

ing a military alliance is treated by Moscow as a direct security issue, which is why it continues to reject Ukrainian membership in NATO.³⁶

On the other hand, Ukraine is unwilling to surrender sovereign territory. During the latest international summits, some flexibility appeared regarding territorial questions, and Ukraine may be willing to concede some land in exchange for a credible peace settlement. However, for this to happen, Russia and the international community would have to present terms that Ukraine could regard as acceptable. Ukraine considers NATO membership and EU accession as key security guarantees, which currently seem uncertain. Paradoxically, the loss of eastern territory might ease certain burdens of postwar reconstruction. This would cut Kyiv off from a costly insurgency in the Donbas and allow reconstruction to focus on more governable, less damaged regions requiring lower public spending.³⁷

Since the US President Donald Trump assumed the role of mediator between the warring parties, his opinion may carry considerable weight during later negotiations. Trump stated that a possible exchange of territory needs to be discussed and declared on social media that he opposes Ukraine's NATO membership, and suggested that Crimea would remain under Russian control after the war. He suggested that security guarantees should not come from NATO but from direct involvement of the US and European countries, especially the coalition of the willing.³⁸ At present, this idea appears to be one of the more workable options, provided that Ukraine accepts it as a credible guarantee.

The scenarios and examples mentioned above can only serve as a general guide for Ukraine. It cannot implement the same policies since each country has unique conditions and a distinct security environment, determined by history, size, demographic composition, geography, and politics. The examples provide the opportunity to analyze best practices and achieve an outcome that is most suitable for Ukraine. The country's leadership must keep both favorable and less favorable scenarios in mind, as harmonizing all the notions of the warring states and their supporters will be a real challenge. Either way, Ukraine's geopolitical status will undergo a significant change depending on which configuration is ultimately implemented.

³⁶ Reuters, "Kremlin Says Joining the EU Is Ukraine's Sovereign Right," February 18, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kremlin-says-joining-eu-is-ukraines-sovereign-right-2025-02-18/>.

³⁷ Kutcher, "The Russo-Ukrainian War and Mackinder's Heartland Thesis," 2024.

³⁸ The Washington Post, "Here's what Russia and Ukraine have demanded to end the war," August 24, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/08/19/russia-ukraine-peace-deal-trump-putin-zelensky/>.

Conclusion

As the preceding analysis has shown, the causes of Ukraine's difficult historical trajectory and the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war can be traced to a range of interrelated factors. The country is divided in multiple ways—ethnically, religiously, demographically, and politically—which has generated internal tensions and created obstacles to nation-building. The confusing and constantly changing circumstances made it extremely difficult for the Ukrainian nation to develop and find its own voice. Due to external power struggles, the country was often unable to consolidate its sovereignty and assert its will. At nearly every stage of its modern history, Ukraine faced the competing ambitions of multiple external powers, and this pattern continues to shape the present. Ukraine may not be able to escape it, as larger political entities will always seek to possess or gain influence over its territory. While geopolitical theories identify Ukraine's strategic centrality, they do not explain the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war, as the conflict emerged from the interaction between structural positioning and incompatible political integration projects that rendered neutrality infeasible.

What emerges most clearly from this analysis is that Ukraine's geopolitical vulnerability is not the product of a single crisis or decision, but the result of a long historical accumulation of structural constraints. Its position between rival centers of power, combined with internal fragmentation and unresolved questions of identity, has repeatedly limited its room for autonomous action. For this reason, Ukraine's predicament should not be understood only through the immediate logic of war, but also through the broader geopolitical and historical patterns that have shaped the state's development since independence.

During the last century's geopolitical transformation, alliances seem to be solidifying. After a while, the constant expansion of the EU and NATO reached Ukraine's doorstep, while Russia was always in its backyard. The spheres of interest of East and West collided on Ukraine's soil, and the state was wedged in between the two parties. The ongoing war highlights that Ukraine can hardly escape its geopolitically unfavorable situation. The forms of state discussed above illustrate the range of roles Ukraine might play in international politics, from serving as a satellite of another power to functioning as a bridge between East and West. The latter would offer a significant opportunity for development, but without the country's reconstruction and the establishment of stable domestic political conditions, Ukraine cannot realistically assume such a role.

The scenarios bring us closer to the image of postwar conditions, which depends on a proper agreement with security guarantees. The final peace treaty will

shape Ukraine's future and geopolitical status, with significant implications for world politics.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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