

Russian or European: Internal Division in Ukraine

Once part of the Soviet Union, Ukraine gained independence in 1991 with the collapse of the U.S.S.R. The Soviet Union's dissolution, however, did not end Ukraine's ties to Russia, as evidenced by the political, cultural, and linguistic disputes which continue to divide Ukrainians. Since the early '90s Russian leaders have expressed the belief that Russians and Ukrainians are one people. This argument stems in part from the linguistic patterns of Ukraine. According to the Ukraine Crisis Media Center, in the western region of Ukraine, bordered by Poland and Romania, 93% of citizens consider Ukrainian to be their native language. In contrast, in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, which border Russia, less than half of citizens view Ukrainian as their native language. Some Russians even go so far as to say that Ukrainian is just a dialect of Russian, thus eliminating the linguistic barrier between the two countries. Linguistic divides also correlate to voting patterns and political divisions within different regions of Ukraine. Opinions are split on whether Ukraine should join Russia as a nation in the Eurasian Economic Union or merge into the more liberal European Union.

Conflict regarding Ukraine's role in Europe developed in late 2013 when former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich rejected a deal for economic integration with the European Union. Anti-government protests started to develop in western Ukraine, and while the former president attempted to quell the protest, the situation escalated, and he was forced to flee the country. In March 2014, Russian troops moved into the Crimean region of Ukraine to annex the peninsula after Crimeans voted to join the Russian Federation. Two months later, the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, in eastern Ukraine, also held a referendum to declare independence from Ukraine. At this time pro-Russia separatist rebels began to seize territory in eastern Ukraine. The fighting between borders escalated into an international crisis when a Malaysian Airlines flight was shot down over Ukraine by a Russian missile in the summer of 2014. Since then, Ukraine has experienced several cyber attacks that have caused widespread blackouts and billions of dollars in computer damage, according to the Council on Foreign Relations. Furthermore, due to ongoing violence in eastern Ukraine, experts estimate that more than 14,000 people have been killed.

These attacks and skirmishes escalated in late 2021, when Russia began moving troops and military equipment to the border of Ukraine and into neighboring countries. Additionally, in December of 2021, Russia issued a demand to ban Ukraine from entering the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and called for a reduction of NATO troops and military equipment in eastern Europe. While it is not yet clear what the consequences of the current crisis will be, the same divides (east versus west, pro-Russia versus pro-Europe) is continuing to haunt the country and stir international affairs.

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Information gathered from Taras Kuzio's "Russian National Identity and the Russia-Ukraine Crisis" in *Federal Academy for Security Policy*, 2016; "Conflict in Ukraine," Council on Foreign Relations (cfr.org); Lubomyr Hajda's "Ukraine" in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2022); David Leonhardt's "Fears of an Invasion" in *The New York Times*, Jan. 20, 2022; Laris Karklis and Ruby Mellen's "Four Maps that Explain the Russia-Ukraine Conflict" in *The Washington Post*, Jan. 21, 2022; "More than 90% of Citizens Consider Themselves Ethnic Ukrainians. . . ." The Ukraine Crisis Media Center (uacrisis.org); and David E. McNabb's *Vladimir Putin and Russia's Imperial Revival* (CRC Press: Taylor and Francis Group, 2016).