

# The Narrow Bottleneck of Ukraine- Russia Reconciliation

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# **The Narrow Bottleneck of Ukraine-Russia Reconciliation:** How past and present Russian actions impede the prospects of reconciliation with Ukraine

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# Contents

Executive Summary .....	1
Introduction .....	2
What Does “Reconciliation” Entail? .....	4
Overview of Recent Ukraine-Russia Reconciliation Initiatives ..	9
Conclusions.....	23
Acknowledgments .....	25
About the Author .....	25
Endnotes .....	26

## Executive Summary

- Ukrainian-Russian reconciliation, as desirable as it might be, will not come about from wishful thinking and cannot be imposed. Well-meaning Western governments should avoid pressure for normalization in the short term.
- Successful reconciliation will require profound political and social change in Russia, for which Ukraine's post-Soviet democratization, and nation-building experience could serve as a template.
- Reconciliation projects in other contexts have successfully relied on instrumental, historical, and structural mechanisms. However, each of these routes contains potential pitfalls for Ukraine and must be navigated carefully, if at all.
- Unfortunately, past attempts to reconcile Russia with its neighbors and former subjects offer more cautionary tales than clear guides.
- Initial steps toward genuine dialogue and eventual reconciliation could involve restorative justice, including holding accountable those responsible for crimes of war and aggression, providing reparations, repatriating abducted Ukrainian children, and collaborating on correcting distorted historical narratives.

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Photo: Russian People take part in an anti-war procession and a rally in Moscow on March 15, 2014. Participants, including opposition activists and supporters, protested against the incursions of the Russian army into Ukraine's Crimea, according to organizers. Credit: REUTERS/Maxim Shemetov.



# Introduction

The end of Russia's war in Ukraine — whether through Ukraine's victory or defeat, a frozen conflict, or a negotiated settlement — will not automatically lead to lasting peace between the two largest powers in Eastern Europe. In the name of sustainable peace, Western leaders are likely to advocate for a rapid postwar reconciliation process, focusing on one or more of the following three reconciliation mechanisms:

1. Instrumental reconciliation through symbolic rapprochement and enhanced cooperation across various domains.
2. Historical reconciliation through transitional justice and truth-seeking.
3. Structural reconciliation through political and social reform.

However, rushing Ukraine into reconciliation without substantial changes in Russia risks increasing insecurity. Western policymakers should take a pragmatic approach to Russia's imperial ambitions, carefully considering if and how to apply reconciliation methods, with a clear understanding of both historical and current contexts.

In essence, genuine reconciliation requires depth change in the Russian Federation, which may take generations and involve political reform and a shift in the prevailing mindset among the majority of its population. Insisting on democratic reforms in Russia is essential to avoid perpetuating insecurity.

In this, Russia may learn much from Ukraine, which serves as an invaluable case study for understanding post-Soviet democratic transformations, if it prioritizes alignment with the West. Until such reforms and shifts take root, however, Russia will likely maintain its imperialistic endeavor for decades, utilizing political, economic, and cultural influence to impede Ukraine's democratic and economic development, reform efforts, European integration, NATO accession, and the further crystallization of Ukrainians' national identity.

With these objectives and challenges in mind, this paper maps the minefields of potential Ukraine-Russia reconciliation. Key findings include:

- Each category of reconciliation mechanisms — instrumental, historical, and structural — poses potential risks for Ukraine and (if the time ever comes) should be cautiously implemented, considering the nuanced details of the existing and historic context.
- Given the need to contain Russia rather than seek normalization at any cost,<sup>1</sup> it is unwise to impose reconciliation on Ukraine, which is actively resisting an imperial absorption. Reconciliation may not be realistic when the oppressed are fervently seeking independence without adequate political



and economic safeguards. Hence, discussions on reconciliation in the West should approach Ukraine-Russia relations from a decolonial perspective.

- Without fundamental changes in the Russian Federation, such as transitioning to democracy and the government's acknowledgment of and commitment to human rights, only "thin" reconciliation can be expected — a coexistence marked by minimal to no trust, respect, and shared values.
- At present, a small bottleneck for initiating reconciliation could potentially be alleviated through Ukraine-Russia dialogues and cooperation addressing issues such as prosecuting war criminals, transferring frozen Russian assets for Ukraine's reconstruction, providing reparations to Ukraine, repatriating abducted Ukrainian children, and correcting distorted Russian historical narratives. However, such engagement will only be effective if it arises organically from the desires of Ukrainian and Russian societies. Attempts to impose such engagement from outside, especially on non-justice restoration-related topics, however well-meaning, will only shift the power balance in favor of Russia and deepen Ukrainian trauma.
- Assessing Ukraine-Russia reconciliation prospects requires avoiding historical parallels, as every context is unique. The most accurate data for projections may be obtained from analyzing Russia's previous reconciliation attempts with Ukraine and other post-Soviet states with which it has been at war. These instances unmistakably illustrate that over the past 30 years, the Russian Federation has consistently pursued an agenda of regional domination, if not of renewed imperialism. Consequently, the limited array of reconciliation mechanisms employed by Russia has primarily functioned to diminish the target countries' autonomy and coerce them back into the orbit of Russian influence.

# What Does “Reconciliation” Entail?

Reconciliation involves transforming relationships from mutual antagonism to “mutual recognition and acceptance” at best (“thick” reconciliation) or a non-conflict coexistence that maintains peace and prevents revenge at a minimum (“thin” reconciliation).<sup>2</sup> Achieving reconciliation is particularly challenging after massive human rights violations, like those committed during the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war.

## Reconciliation Methods

Historical	Instrumental	Structural
Transitional justice mechanisms	Public statements by political, social, cultural, and religious leaders	Reforms that may enable Russia to follow the path of democratic development
Collaborative scholarly endeavors (documentation and narratives)	Strengthening economic, cultural, and social cooperation	
Memorials to honor victims and heroes		

Source: Compiled by author, Elena Davlikanova.

## Reconciliation Mechanisms

While various typologies categorize reconciliation mechanisms, the following three overarching groups can be helpful:<sup>3</sup>

- *Instrumental mechanisms* encompass public statements and symbolic gestures by leaders across political, social, cultural, and religious spheres, alongside efforts to bolster economic, cultural, and social cooperation.
- *Historical mechanisms* span war crimes tribunals, truth commissions, and judicial procedures as transitional justice mechanisms. They also include memorials to honor victims and heroes and collaborative scholarly endeavors to document historical occurrences and reshape narratives.
- *Structural mechanisms* anticipate reforms that will assist a country in embracing changes that ensure the impartial functioning of state institutions, respect for human rights and diversity, and political inclusion.

The complexities inherent in the Russo-Ukrainian relationship pose challenges for implementing these three mechanisms.

Additionally, our emphasis has been on horizontal reconciliation (repairing relations between individuals or groups) rather than vertical reconciliation (between authorities and the people). The latter is a consideration for Russian society if it chooses to revisit the experience of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, where the personality cult and dictatorship of Joseph Stalin were denounced. Such a move may lead to some restoration of justice for political prisoners and victims of today's Kremlin.

## Context

There is no single model or toolkit for reconciliation; context is crucial.<sup>4</sup>

Despite Ukraine formally achieving independence in 1991, the Kremlin and some Russians have never fully accepted its sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>5</sup> Over the centuries, peace between Ukraine and Russia has only occurred when Russia was weak or when Ukraine was under Russian occupation.<sup>6</sup>

The Kremlin distorts the reasons for Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014.<sup>7</sup> However, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Canada, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Ireland have officially recognized Russia's actions as genocide against Ukrainians through their national parliaments.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, on July 13, 2022, the European Commission issued a collective statement supporting Ukraine's actions at the International Court of Justice against Russia, based on the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.<sup>9</sup>

Russia's aggression against Ukraine happened less than 100 years after another Kremlin-orchestrated genocide. The Holodomor, a grand famine in the 1930s, claimed up to 10 million Ukrainian lives.<sup>10</sup> In the decades that followed, reconciliation between Russia and Ukraine meant silencing the horrors of genocide and enduring oppression. This denial "distorted the national mentality and produced or reinforced a variety of post-genocidal syndromes, ranging from historical amnesia to substance dependence to broken families...."<sup>11</sup> The failure to address and deter those actions laid the groundwork for the ongoing Russian atrocities.

Before Russia's full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, nearly half of Ukrainians had relatives or friends in Russia,<sup>12</sup> and over 20% were "Russian-speaking" (a term the Kremlin uses to imply a political identity and conflates linguistic identity with political allegiance<sup>13</sup>).<sup>14</sup> However, it is essential not to be misled into thinking that there is a substantial foundation for post-atrocities reconciliation. Since the Soviet Union's dissolution, Russia has waged a hybrid war against Ukraine, hindering its efforts to determine its own future.



## Examples of Reconciliation in the Aftermath of Conflicts Involving European States and Russia

Sides of Conflict	Assessment of Reconciliation	Factors Contributing to Reconciliation Result
<b>Germany and Europe</b>	Successful	<p>Nazi Germany was defeated, demilitarized and fell under control of other states, which contributed to democratic development in its Western part.</p> <p>Many war criminals were prosecuted. his process is still ongoing</p> <p>Germany launched a comprehensive memory policy work (with a breakthrough two decades after the end of the war), admitted collective political responsibility, paid reparations.</p>
<b>Japan and the US</b>	Successful	<p>Japan was not only militarily defeated but has become the first nation in human history to experience nuclear strikes.</p> <p>Economic aid and investment from the USA and oversight of Japanese political reforms.</p> <p>Adoption of pacifist constitution and democratization.</p>
<b>Britain and South Africa</b>	Semi-successful	<p>End to formal British colonial rule and the democratization of South Africa, achieved notably through the end of apartheid in 1994 (though challenges persist in fully reconciling the historical grievances stemming from colonialism).</p> <p>Britain has used soft power tactics like diplomatic gestures, economic and cultural cooperation, not offering formal apologies for its colonial actions or reparations.</p>
<b>France and Algeria</b>	Semi-successful	<p>End to France's colonialism and democratization of the country.</p> <p>Partial efforts to reconcile through soft power amid inability to officially "ask forgiveness" from Algeria for French colonisation and significant efforts towards reconciliation through economic and cultural tools, as well as reparations.</p>
<b>Russia and Ukraine (from 1921 until 1991)</b>	Semi-successful (coercive)	<p>Centuries of oppression preceding a short period of independence (1918-1921).</p> <p>The defeat of the Ukrainian People's Republic, occupation of Ukraine's territories, genocide and repressions orchestrated by Moscow.</p> <p>One hundred years later, Russia still fails to recognize its crimes and has created a completely distorted memory policy.</p> <p>Lack of genuine reconciliation efforts on Russia's side — the partial reconciliation in Soviet times and some time after is the result of Russian occupation, oppression of dissidents and lack of resources and international support to fight for Ukraine's independence.</p>
<b>Russia and Chechnya</b>	Semi-successful (coercive)	<p>Defeat of Ichkeria and usurpation of power by a leadership backed up by Russia.</p> <p>Lack of punishment for war crimes or relevant memory policy.</p> <p>Lack of genuine reconciliation efforts on Russia's side – the partial reconciliation is the result of Russian occupation of Chechnya that lacks resources and international support to fight for independence.</p>
<b>Russia and Georgia</b>	Semi-successful (coercive)	<p>Lack of genuine reconciliation efforts on Russia's side – the partial reconciliation is the result of Russian military power and lack of resources and international support for Georgia to not observe Russian interests.</p>
<b>Russia and Moldova</b>	Semi-successful (coercive)	<p>Russian support for separatist movements and pro-Russian political parties; heavy Russian propaganda.</p> <p>Lack of international consensus on countering Russian aggressive policies in the region and fear of direct confrontation with Russia.</p>
<b>Russia and Belarus</b>	Semi-Successful (coercive)	<p>Heavy Russian influence over Belarusian politics and economy.</p> <p>Russian propaganda and support of oppressive regime of Lukashenko.</p> <p>Weak western support to civil society's opposition to the regime.</p>
<b>Russia and Hungary</b>	Semi-successful (economically driven)	<p>Russian financial support of Hungarian leadership and strong propaganda.</p> <p>Russian investment in Hungarian atomic energy and Hungarian investment in Russian hydrocarbons.</p> <p>Historical apology during Putin's visit 2006 and 2023.</p>

## Examples of Reconciliation in the Aftermath of Conflicts Involving European States and Russia (continued)

<b>Russia and the Czech Republic</b>	Unsuccessful	Yeltsin and Putin's condemnation that the 1968 invasion was an act of Soviet aggression.
		Czech Parliament adopted a resolution that recognized Russia as a terrorist state.
		Czech Republic announced it planned to sue Russia for unpaid rent on communist-era buildings.
		Czech Republic expelled 18 Russian diplomats after Czech intelligence connected Russian military agents to a massive ammunition depot explosion in 2014.
<b>Russia and Poland</b>	Unsuccessful	Establishment of the Institute of National Remembrance in Poland to investigate Soviet crimes against Polish citizens. (Contributed to reconciliation)
		Adoption of a statement by the Russian State Duma in 2010 acknowledging the Katyn massacre as a crime of the Stalinist regime. (Contributed to reconciliation)
		Commission on "difficult issues." (Contributed to reconciliation)
		Putin's statement during a visit in 2009. (Contributed to reconciliation)
		Disputes over trade and Poland's plans to deploy missile defense facilities, which Russia perceived as a security threat. (Did not contribute to reconciliation)
		Then Polish President Lech Kaczynski's support for Georgia during the 2008 war with Russia, which strained relations. (Did not contribute to reconciliation)
		Kaczynski's death in a plane crash near Smolensk Air Base in 2010, which led to conspiracy theories in Poland and deeper cooling of relations, including Poland's recognition of Russia as a terrorist state for aggression against Ukraine. (Did not contribute to reconciliation)
		Despite Patriarch Kirill's visit to Poland in 2012 and a joint message calling for reconciliation, tensions persisted. (Did not contribute to reconciliation)
		Current support for Ukraine's European Union and NATO integration and Poland's preparations to defend against a Russian attack on its territory. (Did not contribute to reconciliation)

Table: Center for European Policy Analysis. Source: Compiled by author, Elena Davlikanova.

The dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized, as evident in the Russo-Ukrainian relationship, pose significant challenges for reconciliation. Achieving meaningful reconciliation requires the colonizer to acknowledge the colonized as equals and recognize their right to self-determination, necessitating a profound political shift in Russia.

Russia has occasionally shown an interest in reconciling with its neighbors and former vassals, but this effort has been inconsistent and often driven by the desire to re-establish its dominance. Mikhail Gorbachev's shift from the Brezhnev Doctrine, which allowed Soviet intervention to maintain the communist bloc, to the Sinatra Doctrine, which removed the threat of military intervention, paved the way for the liberations of 1989 and the reintegration of Central and Eastern Europe into the European family.<sup>15</sup> However, when independence movements emerged within the Soviet Union, starting with the Baltics, Gorbachev hesitated.

After Gorbachev and the failed hard-line *putsch* that sought to oust him, post-Soviet Russia had an opportunity to change its approach. Boris Yeltsin supported Baltic independence to undermine Gorbachev and the Communist Party, accelerating

Russia's own move toward sovereignty. As a result, relations between Russia and the Baltic states were strong in the early 1990s.<sup>16</sup> However, communist, nationalist, and populist politicians stoked resentment over the lost empire and feared the growing national identities of various nations, weaponizing the narrative of alleged oppression of Russian-speaking populations. This created friction between Moscow and the newly independent states, from Belarus and Moldova in the west to Tajikistan in the east, with Ukraine caught in the middle.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, the two unjustified Chechen wars clearly demonstrated that Russia remained the true heir of the Soviet Union: using military force to suppress separatist movements and maintain control over its territories. By the time Yeltsin left office at the end of 1999, even Russia's economic-minded reformers were talking about a "liberal empire."<sup>18</sup>

Initially, Putin used reconciliation as a tool of economic diplomacy, offering apologies for the 1956 and 1968 invasions and the Katyń massacre to improve relations with Budapest, Prague, and Warsaw. However, as Putin came increasingly to rely on nationalist rhetoric at home and on the rehabilitation of the memory of the Soviet empire in particular, the Kremlin saw confrontation with its former colonies as both inevitable and desirable.<sup>19</sup> The Kremlin believed it needed political, economic, and military domination in its "near abroad" to feel secure at home, making genuine reconciliation impossible.<sup>20</sup>

Reconciliation with an empire-minded aggressor is possible under one of the following scenarios:

1. Complete military defeat of the aggressor, followed by its democratization and pacification.
2. Gradual democratization of the aggressor through historical processes, a willingness to liberate colonies, and the ability to build cooperative relationships, though not always fully addressing past injustices.
3. An oppressive situation where victim states lack the resources and international support to resist imperial ambitions, leading to forced "thin" reconciliation and survival through subjugation or occupation.
4. The victim state's ability to join security alliances or obtain security commitments from powerful countries to counter the aggressor and achieve "thin" reconciliation, depending on changing context.

For Ukraine to follow the path of Poland rather than Georgia or Belarus, it must be accepted into the European Union (EU) and NATO as soon as possible. Unfortunately, NATO membership remains a distant dream rather than an immediate goal, given the Alliance's unwillingness to escalate tensions with Russia, despite Finland's recent accession increasing NATO's border with Russia.

Before exploring the threats to Ukraine within a classical reconciliation mechanism, it is helpful to review recent attempts at reconciliation between Ukraine and Russia.

## Overview of Recent Ukraine-Russia Reconciliation Initiatives

Since Russia annexed Crimea and launched a war in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014, the international community has implemented several initiatives aimed at establishing dialogue and facilitating reconciliation in Ukraine.<sup>21</sup>

Most of these initiatives focused on internal reconciliation rather than dialogue between the countries. For example, they aimed to foster understanding between citizens in occupied and government-controlled territories or between internally displaced persons (IDPs) and their host communities. The “Restoration of Governance and Reconciliation in Crisis-Affected Communities of Ukraine” project, co-led by UNDP, UN Women, the Swedish International Development Agency, and The Swiss Agency for Cooperation and Development, was funded by the European Union. Additionally, the “Break the Ice” initiative, supported by the US Embassy in Kyiv, worked on reconciling and reintegrating internally displaced children by providing a peaceful and safe environment for learning, developing, and strengthening resilience.<sup>22</sup>

The Ukrainian government and civil society have also driven several reconciliation initiatives.<sup>23</sup> Launched in 2020, the National Platform for Reconciliation and Unity, aimed to demonstrate Ukraine’s commitment to peace and dialogue. Additionally, the International Centre for Policy Studies, a Ukrainian think tank, worked on the “Initiating the Participatory National Dialogue in Ukraine” project.<sup>24</sup> These are just a few of the many national and local initiatives that showcase Ukraine’s openness to constructive dialogue within its society and its respect for sovereignty.

Few initiatives openly recognized the Russian Federation as a party to the conflict and reconciliation efforts. For example, in 2018–19, the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission between Russia and Ukraine, with the Mediation of the European Union, drafted recommendations for peace between Russia and Ukraine and between Russia and the democratic world. Believing that the Russian Federation should one day be reintegrated into the broader family of democratic nations, the commission noted that Russia “must first carry out work within itself to integrate the democratic principles that it accepted theoretically after 1991...and repair the wrongs committed against its neighbors.”<sup>25</sup> The commission specifically underlined the need to “reject any naivety towards a State that seriously destabilizes the international order.”<sup>26</sup>

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, drastically changed the context, leaving no room for manipulation and linguistic games in political discourse. Russia was recognized as a state sponsor of terrorism,<sup>27</sup> the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an arrest warrant for Putin,<sup>28</sup> and there are discussions

about establishing a special tribunal for the crime of aggression against Ukraine.<sup>29</sup> The report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine presents evidence of a wide range of violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law in Ukraine and Russia, committed on the order of the Russian government and supported by Russian citizens.<sup>30</sup> These war crimes include willful killings, attacks on civilians, unlawful confinement, torture, rape, forced transfers, and deportations of children, etc.<sup>31</sup>

As of June 2023, a majority (78%) of Ukrainians have close relatives or friends who have been injured or killed due to the Russian invasion.<sup>32</sup> The war has created almost 7 million IDPs and 6 million refugees.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, no anti-war protest in Russia has managed to attract 100,000 people so far.<sup>34</sup> Ties between Ukrainians and their relatives, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances in Russia have been severely damaged since the full-scale invasion.<sup>35</sup>

## **Instrumental Mechanisms**

### **Symbolic Gestures and Statements of Politicians and Civic Leaders**

Statements of respect, apologies for harm suffered, or other symbolic gestures by political, social, cultural, and religious leaders are important for reconciliation.<sup>36</sup> Notable examples include German Chancellor Willy Brandt's demonstration of respect to the victims of Nazis at the Warsaw Ghetto memorial in 1970 and the visits of US President Barack Obama to Hiroshima and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to Pearl Harbor in 2016.

"The two leaders' visit will showcase the power of reconciliation that has turned former adversaries into the closest of allies," the White House said in a statement about the 2016 visit by Obama and Abe to the USS Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor.<sup>37</sup> It is important to note that Germany and Japan were defeated in World War II and underwent significant internal changes (which to some are not complete), which helped overcome the ideological differences that had caused the conflicts before these gestures were possible.

Putin is unlikely to acknowledge the Ukrainian victims of the ongoing war.<sup>38</sup> It is doubtful that his successor will be substantially different, especially if power transitions within the current elite. Even the Russian opposition lacks consensus on strategies for restoring relations with Ukraine, as Russia's imperialistic agenda remains popular among the general population.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin continues its nuclear threats and intensifies anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western propaganda.<sup>39</sup> First Deputy Chairman of the Russian State Duma's Committee on International Affairs, Alexei Chepa, emphasized that reconciliation directly depends on developments at the front line.<sup>40</sup>



Photo: Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy visits an area damaged by Russian military strikes, as Russia's attack on Ukraine continues, in Kharkiv, Ukraine May 29, 2022. Credit: Ukrainian Presidential Press Service/Handout.

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Despite severe punishment in Russia for anti-war “propaganda,” there have been anti-war protests and statements by officers, some representatives of academia, intelligentsia, and civil society.<sup>41</sup> Russian researcher Yury Terekhov identified over 100 anti-war initiatives in Russia and abroad, ranging from fundraising for the Ukrainian army's needs to decolonization art projects.<sup>42</sup>

Notable gestures include Russian lawyers endorsing the “Tribunal for Putin” and the support the Moscow-based human rights group Memorial has provided to a Ukrainian human rights defender and a prisoner of the Kremlin anti-fascist Maxym Butkevych.<sup>43</sup> An Anti-War Committee member and businessman, Yevgeny Chichvarin, provided \$2.5 million in aid to Ukraine.<sup>44</sup> Russian opposition leader Vladimir Kara-Murza's statements led to the first instance of the strictest punishment for anti-war rhetoric under new Russian legislation: 25 years in prison.<sup>45</sup>

However, such efforts are overshadowed by pro-war declarations, silence, and the indifference of the majority of the Russian population.<sup>46</sup> In the near future, only Russian civil society actors who have not stayed silent and indifferent can take the



first small step toward reconciliation with Ukraine. They can initiate a “hard talk” with Russian society, challenge current historical narratives, promote justice for victims, and condemn perpetrators, thereby setting the stage for the application of historical reconciliation mechanisms.

This would also require extensive efforts to enforce the rule of law, which involves structural reforms. For reconciliation within Russia, it is essential to bring justice to victims of the regime, like tortured anti-war poet Artem Kamardin and artist Sasha Skochilenko.<sup>47</sup> An honest internal discussion within the Russian society should precede any reconciliation efforts between Russians and the oppressed peoples.

In addition to addressing individual criminal guilt for war crimes in Ukraine, promoting discussions about the collective political responsibility of the Russian people is essential. The late US historian and political philosopher Hannah Arendt demonstrated how building any dictatorship requires the integration and normalization of that regime in the minds of its citizens. She emphasized that it is humans’ duty to prevent evil.<sup>48</sup> Both Arendt and the late German-Swiss psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers believed that society can be changed only through the acceptance of political responsibility.<sup>49</sup> Most Ukrainians believe this too.

One of the few Russian intellectuals who agrees with this idea is Vladimir Sorokin. “As a Russian, I unquestionably share in the collective responsibility for the unleashed war. However, I am also compelled to ask myself personally: what specific actions did I neglect to prevent this war?”, Sorokin said in an interview with Radio Liberty. “I believe every sensible person asks themselves the same question. This guilt will continue to grow even after the war ends; we will carry it within ourselves. We Russians will all bear this bitter burden. Each of us will carry our own stone on our back. The weight and size of each stone will be determined individually. But we are all culpable, not just Putin and his team. The issue lies in the fact that, similar to the Stalinist era, the regime is upheld by the existence of millions who share the same consciousness, ethics, and rhetoric as figures like Stalin or Putin.”<sup>50</sup>

## **The Role of the Church**

The church played a pivotal role in initiating German-Polish reconciliation in the 1950s.<sup>51</sup> In Ukraine and Russia, both multi-confessional societies, various religious organizations could potentially contribute to promoting repentance and forgiveness. However, it is unlikely to involve the Russian Orthodox Church or the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, which are the largest denominations in both countries.<sup>52</sup>

The moral leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is questionable. According to a Royal United Services Institute report, the ROC supports Russian information operations, and its priests are recruited by Russian special services.



Photo: KYIV, UKRAINE - MARCH 31, 2023 - Supporters of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP) hold an impromptu prayer service outside the Church of Agapetus of Pechersk at the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, Kyiv, March 31, 2023. On March 29, UOC (MP) priests had to leave the Lavra premises since the agreement on the free lease of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra territory expired. Credit: Reuters/Eugen Kotenko.

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Patriarch Kirill, known for his KGB past, supported the Russian invasion of Ukraine, stating that dying in war “washes away the sins.” This statement starkly contradicts the Sixth Commandment, “Thou shalt not kill.” Moreover, he claims that the war in Ukraine is defensive and that the people of Ukraine have been seduced by Western “forces of evil”. This stance undermines the ROC’s potential role in fostering genuine reconciliation.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the spiritual head of the world’s Orthodox Christians, said that the ROC shares responsibility for the conflict in Ukraine. However, he also expressed his readiness to assist in Russia’s postwar “spiritual regeneration.”<sup>53</sup>

The communists established the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) to control believers within Ukraine and to participate in foreign intelligence activities.<sup>54</sup> Currently, the UOC-MP is not only formally affiliated with the

ROC but also infiltrated by Russian intelligence officers and collaborators.<sup>55</sup> Some priests have even participated in laying the ground for the acceptance of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and later provided Ukrainian armed forces' positions to the enemy.

Given the political nature of the UOC-MP, Ukraine had to balance ensuring religious freedom with safeguarding national security.<sup>56</sup> Since the onset of Russia's full-scale aggression, based on Ukraine Security Service reports, 68 criminal cases have been launched against members of the UOC-MP, including 14 involving metropolitans. These include 20 cases of treason, collaborationism, and aiding Russia, 18 cases of incitement to religious hatred, firearms sales, and child pornography distribution.<sup>57</sup> As a result, 19 priests have lost their Ukrainian citizenship.<sup>58</sup>

The ROC is unlikely to find a reconciliation partner in the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), which was granted autocephaly (self-governorship) by Constantinople in October 2018.<sup>59</sup> This recognition as the sole canonical successor of the Kyiv Metropolitanate from the 10th to 12th centuries, the church of the Kyivan Rus era, restores historical justice and counters the Kremlin's distorted history. The Kyiv Metropolitanate was under the direct jurisdiction of Constantinople from the adoption of Christianity in 988 until the late 17th century, when it was non-canonically annexed by the Moscow Patriarchate.

The ROC, the largest patriarchate in the Orthodox world, effectively supports genocide.<sup>60</sup> The "Russian world" concept incorporates various Christian ideas manipulated to serve the Kremlin's political agenda. Therefore, any attempts by the Russian regime to use the ROC to hide current political strategies with a distorted version of reconciliation should be rejected.<sup>61</sup>

### **Strengthening Economic Cooperation**

After the Soviet Union dissolved, Russia consistently used economic cooperation to influence Ukraine's domestic politics. Significant examples include the 2010 "Kharkiv Agreements," which extended Russia's Black Sea Fleet presence in Ukraine by 25 years in exchange for a 30% discount on Russian gas and a \$15 billion loan.<sup>62</sup> Another instance was Russia's obstruction of Ukraine signing the Association Agreement with the EU in 2013.<sup>63</sup> Russia imposed export restrictions and warned that signing the agreement would be "suicidal" for Ukraine.<sup>64</sup>

Russia uses debt relief, bank bailouts, preferential trade agreements, oil and gas export discounts, nuclear power cooperation, and extensive commercial engagement to advance both its economic interests and global political influence. By buying out local politicians, Russia introduces political corruption and weakens democratic institutions in its "partner" countries. In 2022, Ukraine's National Security





Photo: 200 Ukrainian Hryvnias banknote with the image of Lesya Ukrainka and other Ukrainian hryvnia banknotes. Credit: Karol Serewis / SOPA Images/Sipa USA.

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and Defense Council banned 11 political parties with ties to Russia in response to national security threats.<sup>65</sup>

Ukraine's efforts to reduce economic dependence on Russia have come at a high human cost, with hundreds killed during the Revolution of Dignity and thousands more in the ongoing war. Since 2014, Ukraine has actively shifted its main trading partner from Russia to the EU.<sup>66</sup> In 2022, sanctions and the freezing of asset further reduced Russian influence.<sup>67</sup> If Russia becomes involved in the reconstruction of Ukraine beyond the seized assets and reparations, it may undermine Ukraine's efforts to eliminate harmful Russian influence.

Some optimists view the EU as a model of successful reconciliation through economic cooperation. However, it is important to note that the EU's foundation was built on the ruins of former empires. The last empire, partially democratized and demilitarized, acknowledged its faults, faced accountability in international tribunals, revised historical memory extensively, and paid reparations. Although the EU initially aimed to create a unified economic space, shared values have been fundamental to its cohesion.

For reconciliation to be successful, the demand must come from the conflicting groups themselves. External facilitators should remain impartial and objective, as any hidden economic or political motivations can retraumatize victims and undermine the reconciliation process by fostering distrust and frustration.

### **Culture as a Soft but Deadly Power**

The Kremlin skillfully uses culture as a weapon to destabilize societies, colonize and exert influence on other nations' identities, and strengthen puppet regimes.<sup>68</sup> Russian culture, heavily politicized, serves as a potent tool for both domestic and international influence.<sup>69</sup>

“We are all militarists and imperialists. War is the self-assertion of the nation,” Mikhail Piotrovsky, director of the Hermitage Museum, told *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. He added: “Our latest exhibitions abroad are simply a powerful cultural offensive. If you want, a ‘special operation’ of sorts.”<sup>70</sup>

Contemporary Russian culture supports territorial expansion, justifying it by the “infinity of the Russian world.”<sup>71</sup> This stems from a desire to restore perceived “lost greatness” after “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [XX] century”<sup>72</sup> — the collapse of the Soviet Union, an event uniquely felt as a loss by Russians among the newly established countries — and to emphasize Russia’s “difference” from the West.

In Ukraine, Putin’s objectives extend beyond controlling territory to erasing Ukrainian culture and identity.<sup>73</sup> Since the era of the Russian Empire, Ukrainian culture has been depicted as secondary, rural, and supplementary to the Great Russian culture. An example is the poem “On the Independence of Ukraine” by the late Soviet dissident Joseph Brodsky, which was never officially published.<sup>74</sup>

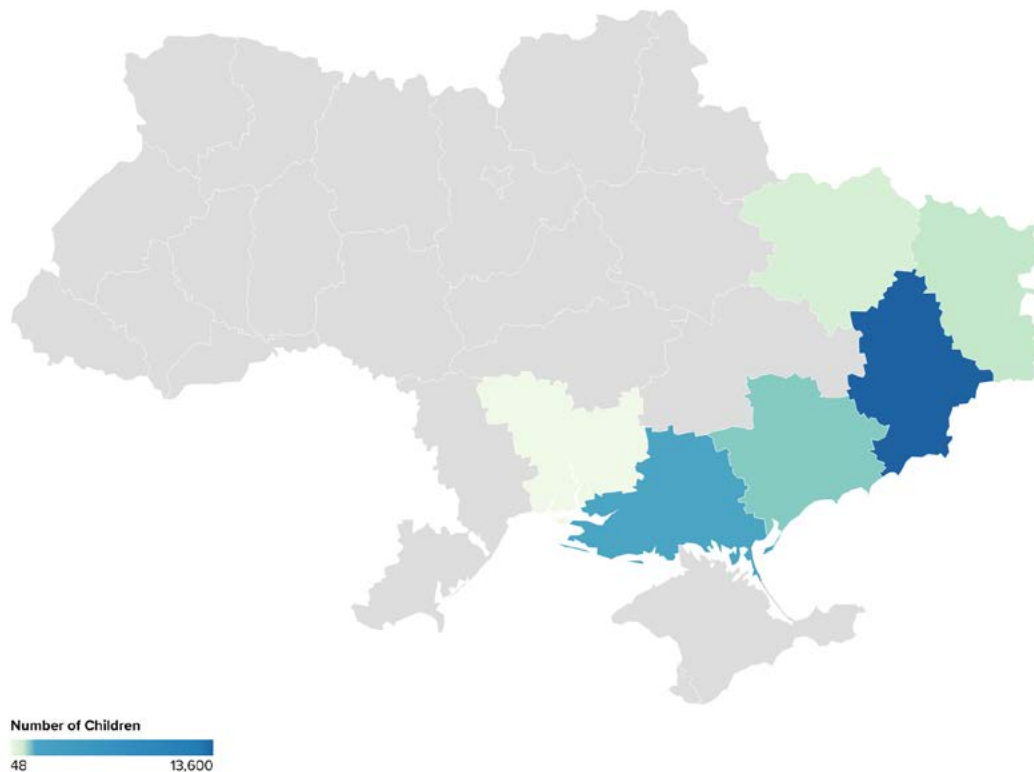
“Brodsky’s poem sheds light on a painful truth that many in the West are still struggling to grasp,” writes Kate Tsurkan, a Ukraine-based US writer and chief editor of *Apofenie Magazine*. “While Russian literary figures have traditionally been lionized by Western audiences as symbols of a freer Russia, their readiness to take a stand against the autocracy of the Russian state does not necessarily make them natural allies of the Ukrainian national project. Indeed, Ukrainians have long noted that Russian liberalism ends at the Ukrainian border.”<sup>75</sup>

Cultural sociologist Pascal Guillen argues that Ukrainians require a culture of rejection because the decolonization of Ukraine remains incomplete.<sup>76</sup>

Cultural projects that question the moral aspects of Russian leadership and society’s actions in the ongoing war can help both reconciliation and counter the Kremlin’s cultural offensive. This offensive is reflected in state-sponsored productions like the



## The Forceful Displacement and Deportation of Ukrainian Children



Map: Center for European Policy Analysis.  
Source: National Information Bureau of Ukraine.

controversial drama “The Witness.”<sup>77</sup> This film, the first feature about the 18-month-old invasion, depicts Ukrainian troops as violent neo-Nazis who torture and kill their own people.

### Fostering Social Cooperation

The main reason for the significant break in ties between Ukrainians and Russians after February 2022 is deep ideological differences. Values like the love for freedom clash with imperialism, humanism contends with indifference or aggression, and the pursuit of justice and truth confronts denial.

One of the few meaningful avenues for social cooperation is the joint effort to locate Ukrainian children kidnapped by Russians and subsequently return them to Ukraine. The Ukrainian peace plan, presented by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, along with the return of all territories, includes Point 4 — to return of all prisoners of war and civilian Ukrainians, including deported children. Ukrainian Ombudsman



Dmytro Lubinets, along with various state agencies, human rights organizations, and volunteers, are working to track and bring children back through the newly established International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children. The identities of the Russian participants in these efforts are kept secret to protect them and ensure their work can continue.

Ukraine reports nearly 19,000 deported children, while Russian ombudsman Maria Lvova-Belova, who is the target of an ICC arrest warrant for the unlawful deportation and transfer of children from Ukraine, claims that more than 700,000 Ukrainian children have been taken to Russia since the beginning of the war.<sup>78</sup>

Unless the ideological barrier is removed, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine will remain a clash of worldviews and mindsets, not just about territory or material interests. This makes it much harder to resolve.

## Historical Mechanisms

Historical mechanisms can be crucial for reconciliation between Russia and Ukraine. They help ensure accountability, restore justice for victims, prevent future conflicts, and foster Russia's democratic development. Discussing trauma itself can be therapeutic.

These mechanisms include war crimes tribunals, truth commissions, and other judicial procedures as part of transitional justice. They also involve memorials honoring victims and heroes, collaborative scholarly endeavors to research and document historical occurrences, and the creation or reshaping of narratives.<sup>79</sup>

Large-group identity theory, which examines the persistent sameness of tens of millions of individuals who may never meet, provides valuable insights into how collective identities are transmitted across generations through narratives of "chosen glories and chosen traumas."<sup>80</sup> Vamil D. Volkan describes large-group identity as the subjective experience of many persons linked by a sense of their own uniqueness.<sup>81</sup> The Russian collective identity is tied to a distorted view of Russia's past and present, reflected in concepts such as the Russian world, Eurasianism, the Great Russian Empire, and the victorious Soviet Union.<sup>82</sup> The view sees Western values as sinful and hostile, contributing to the ideological divide.

Discrediting narratives that justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the supposed superiority of the Russian nation is essential for reconciliation. Without this, the "abuses [they committed] remain uncontested and effectively reinforce an equivalence between violators and the violated, with each 'side' having its own justifications or interpretation of what happened," writes Ernesto Verdeja, associate professor of political science and peace studies in the Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame.<sup>83</sup>



Photo: In Kherson, law enforcement officers investigate a torture chamber used by Russian forces in the regional police headquarters. Credit: National Police of Kherson Oblast.

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Before setting up any dialogue platforms that might re-traumatize Ukrainians, grassroots initiatives in Russia should focus on uncovering the broader truth about Russia's treatment of its neighbors. Similar to the work done by Memorial, these efforts can help rethink Russian collective identity and address collective political responsibility.

Joint initiatives could later promote individual reconciliation and lay the groundwork for national reconciliation. This could involve truth commissions, collaborative historical research, and awareness campaigns on the crimes committed by the Russian army and leadership, including art projects. A truth commission should explore not only the harms inflicted from 2014 to the present but also Soviet-era and other historical events. In Ukraine, the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance is already working with Soviet-era documents.

A distorted interpretation of history fosters Russians' sense of superiority over Ukrainians.<sup>84</sup> Processes like de-Stalinization, de-Sovietization, and, notably, de-Putinization can help Russia overcome the damage inflicted by decades of

propaganda. This is essential for decolonizing Ukraine and other oppressed nations and democratizing Russia, fostering long-term peace in Europe and Asia, and integrating Russia into the Western world.

Addressing individual culpability requires drawing on the experiences of international and hybrid criminal courts, especially regarding current Russian leaders and propagandists.<sup>85</sup> Initiatives to ensure justice for the victims of war crimes committed in the occupied territories of Ukraine can foster cooperation between Russian and Ukrainian civil society and elites.

Over the past three decades, the Russian leadership has not adequately addressed historical events like the Holodomor, the deportation of Crimean Tatars, or the repression of Ukrainian dissidents. Attempts to raise these issues are often dismissed by Russian propaganda as Ukrainian nationalism.<sup>86</sup>

Some advocate for societal forgetfulness to expedite reconciliation, but this overlooks the power dynamics and the continued influence of perpetrators.<sup>87</sup> “Public forgetting instrumentalizes victims by signaling that their moral value is less important than stability and peace,” writes Verdeja.<sup>88</sup>

Russian civil society committed a significant error by not confronting the past. At the Russian human rights group Memorial’s founding conference in 1989, the decision to refrain from prosecuting KGB crimes undermined efforts to establish a framework for changing societal values.<sup>89</sup>

Unearthing the past is imperative for shaping reconciliation.<sup>90</sup> It acts as a political litmus test for Russian decision-makers and civil society. Historical narratives play a pivotal role in changing beliefs, attitudes, and motivations, laying the groundwork for initiating reconciliation processes.<sup>91</sup>

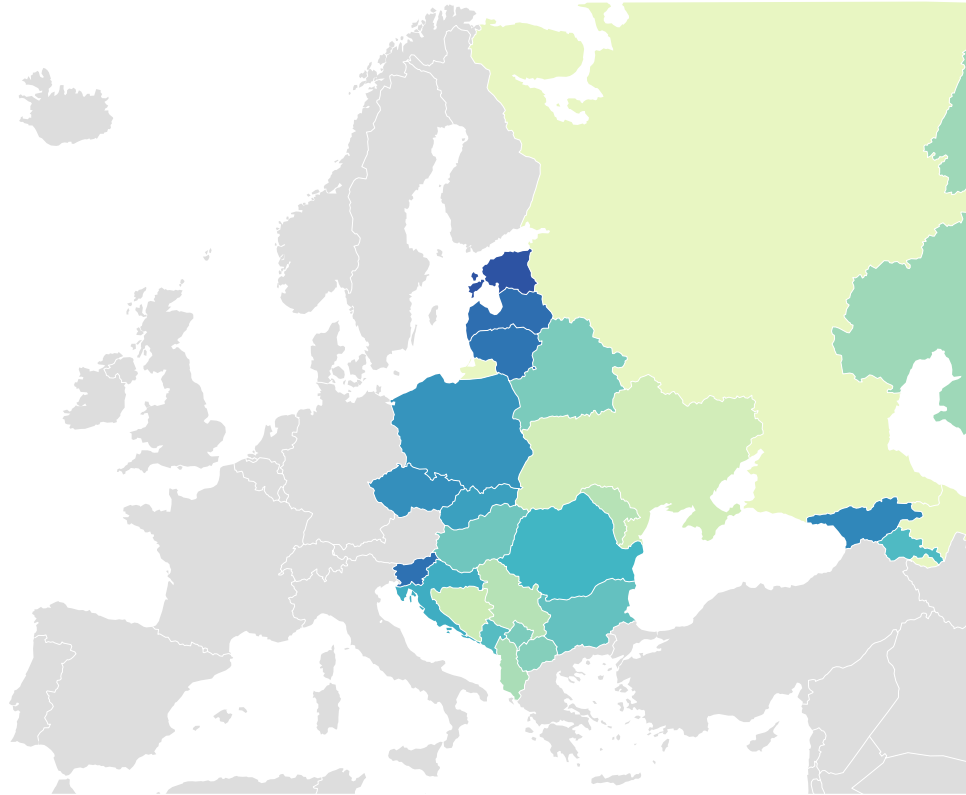
## Structural Mechanisms

Backward-looking historical mechanisms supplement forward-looking structural mechanisms crucial for reconciliation. Structural reforms aimed at fostering reconciliation should pave the way for Russia’s democratic development, sustainable economic growth, social equality, inclusion, protection of minorities, and the assurance of political participation rights. If Russia can confront its past and align itself with the Western world, Ukraine can provide valuable insights into democratic transformations in a post-Soviet context.

Key to reconciliation are reforms targeting corruption, decentralization, lustration, and decommunization. Ukraine has addressed corruption through independent anti-corruption mechanisms, electronic procurement systems, and AI-powered risk monitoring tools. Despite ongoing challenges, Ukraine ranks higher than Russia on Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index.<sup>92</sup>

## Corruption Perceptions Index in Formerly Communist Countries

Transparency International  
Index  
0 (poor) 100 (excellent)



Map: Center for European Policy Analysis.  
Source: Transparency International 2023.

Effective decentralization is critical for redistributing resources and power. Ukraine has implemented decentralization reform, but caution is needed to prevent calls for federalization, which align with Russia's efforts to weaken Ukraine.<sup>93</sup> Russia's federalism experience shows it does not necessarily lead to genuine decentralization.

Decentralization also plays a role in safeguarding the rights of national minorities oppressed in Russia. For instance, as of 2019, there were approximately two million Ukrainians in Russia with no Ukrainian schools. Since the occupation of Crimea in 2014, Ukrainian-language education has dwindled, contrasting with Ukraine, where many students study Russian.<sup>94</sup> Russian Deputy Minister of Education Alexander Bugaev stated that children in the occupied territories would study the Ukrainian language as an elective subject, with Russian being the primary language of instruction.<sup>95</sup> Meanwhile, even after the full-scale invasion, nearly 450,000

schoolchildren in Ukraine study the Russian language in over 4,000 schools, with 10% of them having Russian as the primary language of instruction.<sup>96</sup>

Considering de-Russification as a matter of national security for Ukraine and the absence of any threat to Russia in ensuring the rights of national minorities, the genuine development of Ukrainian language and culture in the Russian Federation could be a positive gesture for reconciliation. The idea of Russian as a second state language in Ukraine lacks support, as most Ukrainians reject claims of language rights oppression.<sup>97</sup>

Decommunization is pivotal in the post-Soviet space,<sup>98</sup> intertwining with memory policies. While currently equated with fascism and the resurgence of far-right sentiments in Russia, it offers opportunities for cooperation among political elites and civil societies.

Another area that could facilitate Ukrainian-Russian dialogue is sharing experiences regarding lustration. Lustration involves restrictions on high-ranking officials in the former communist regime, former secret police agents, and sometimes all members of communist parties who undermined state interests or human rights from public office. It has been pivotal in Eastern Europe since the late 1980s, with countries like Ukraine, Poland, and Romania implementing it to varying extents.

These initiatives illustrate pathways for Ukrainian-Russian dialogue, focusing on shared experiences in combating corruption, enhancing decentralization, and addressing historical legacies like decommunization and lustration.



Photo: Ukrainian flag flies behind the Unity Sculpture in Kyiv. Credit: Ruslan Kanuka/Ukrinform/Sipa USA.

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## Conclusions

A quarter century passed after the end of World War II before German Chancellor Willy Brandt knelt at the Warsaw Ghetto. It is unrealistic to expect Russian leadership to make a similar gesture soon, and equally unrealistic to expect Ukraine to once again ignore its trauma and hastily seek reconciliation with a state that has committed genocide against Ukrainians twice in less than a century.

Separation might be a fairer solution than forcing adversaries to reconcile, especially when the oppressed group seeks independence and lacks viable prospects for political and economic protections in the current setup.<sup>99</sup> Hence, discussing Ukrainian-Russian reconciliation from a decolonial perspective in the West becomes crucial.<sup>100</sup>

In 2018–19, the Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission between Russia and Ukraine, with the Mediation of the European Union, put forth recommendations for peace between Russia and Ukraine, as well as between Russia and the democratic world. With the belief that Russia should eventually be reintegrated into the broader



family of democratic nations, the commission emphasized that Russia “must first carry out work within itself to integrate the democratic principles that it accepted theoretically after 1991... and repair the wrongs committed against its neighbors.”<sup>101</sup> The commission specifically emphasized the necessity to “reject any naivety towards a State that seriously destabilizes the international order.”<sup>102</sup>

When evaluating the potential for reconciliation between Ukraine and Russia, we deliberately refrain from drawing direct historical parallels, recognizing the uniqueness of each context. However, a more nuanced understanding can be gained by examining Russia’s interactions with other nations it has conflicted with in the post-Soviet era.

Russia’s past conflicts with Chechnya, Moldova, and Georgia have not seen the Kremlin apologize or acknowledge wrongdoing. Moscow has consistently employed economic, cultural, and historical tools to assert control over political processes, indicating a persistent pattern.

Given this pattern, it seems unlikely that Russia will change its approach toward Ukraine after the current hostilities end. Russia appears committed to maintaining a strategy that relies on economic, cultural, and historical influence to exert control. Ukrainian journalist Vitaliy Portnikov underscored the complexity of the challenges ahead, suggesting that reconciliation between Russians and Ukrainians may be possible from a historical perspective but remains unlikely as long as the average Russian citizen views the lands of modern Ukraine as part of Russia.<sup>103</sup>

The colonialist and colonized dynamics in Russo-Ukrainian relations complicate reconciliation. Historical examples from former European empires demonstrate that true reconciliation often required the collapse and redefinition of political and social agreements with former colonies, albeit with mixed success. Without such a transformative shift, any cease-fire might only offer a temporary pause before renewed aggression.

## Acknowledgments

I wish to express sincere gratitude to the Ukrainian Armed Forces and the Ukrainian people for their courageous resistance against a longstanding enemy, ensuring Ukraine's sovereignty. I am deeply thankful to Ukraine's allies for vital military, financial and humanitarian support in the times of major geopolitical shifts.

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**Elena Davlikanova** is a Democracy Fellow with the Center for European Policy Analysis.

Davlikanova's work is focused on Ukraine and Russia's domestic issues and their effects on global peace. She also studies historical, social, economic, and cultural narratives about Ukraine and Russia, their connection to on-the-ground situations, and their influence on decision-making practices and processes. She is an experienced researcher, who in 2022 conducted the studies "The Work of Ukrainian Parliament at Wartime" and "Understanding Ukraine: The Battle of Narratives."

Since 2011, Davlikanova's professional life has been mainly devoted to working for the National Democratic Institute and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation Office in Ukraine. There she contributed to the democratic development of Ukraine by implementing national level projects for the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of power, as well as to Ukraine's European integration. Her interests also include promoting gender equality. Among other initiatives, she facilitated the compilation of the book "100+ Stories of Women and Girls from Russia's War against Ukraine." Davlikanova received her Candidate of Sciences degree (Ph.D.) in management from the Sumy State University in Ukraine. Her work was based on the facilitated by her national level project aimed at education reform. She is also an Associate Professor in the International Economic Relations Department at Sumy State University.

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