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Ukrainian-Russian relations have a long and controversial history, dating back hundreds of years. Their main theme is the desire of Muscovy and its successors – the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation - to prevent the establishment of an independent state for the Ukrainian people and thus prevent the country from becoming a full member of the European community of nations.

Since Ukraine gained independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian elite has regarded it as an unfortunate historical "misunderstanding" that should be corrected as soon as possible. According to Russian President Putin, this collapse is "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century." The events of 2014-2015 proved that this view is widely supported throughout Russian society. Even in January 2016, according to the results of opinion polls, 64% of Russians supported the aggression against Ukraine.

In the minds of the Kremlin leadership and much of the population, Russia is surrounded by enemies who want to capture Russian natural resources. The leading role in this "global conspiracy" is played by the West, led by the US. In order to survive, the Russian leadership believes in the absolute necessity to regain control over the lost territories of the USSR and the "socialist camp". The key objective is to recapture Ukraine, which should dramatically increase Russia's demographic, political, economic, military and other resources. In the irrational worldview of the "Kremlin dreamers", restoring control over Kyiv - "the mother of all cities", capital and ancestral home of Eastern Slavic Orthodoxy - is a vital interest of Russia.

On August 26, 1991, two days after the Verkhovna Rada adopted the Act of Independence of Ukraine, P.Voschanov, press secretary of RSFSR President Boris Yeltsin, on his behalf announced the official position of Russia's relations with the "Union republics": "RSFSR reserves the right to raise the issue of revision of borders." On August 28, 1991 the official delegation of the RSFSR led by Vice President of the Russian Federation O. Rutsikoy came to Kyiv to force the Ukrainian leadership to renounce the newly proclaimed independence and threatened to revise borders in case Ukraine separates from Russia.

Only six months later, Russia's territorial claims to Ukraine were issued as official decisions of Russian supreme state bodies. On May 21, 1992, the RF Parliament adopted Decree № 2809-1 "On legal evaluation of the decisions of the supreme bodies of state power of the RSFSR to change the status of Crimea, adopted in 1954," according to which the decree of the Presidium of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet of February 5, 1954 "On the transfer of the Crimean region from the RSFSR to the Ukrainian SSR" was recognized as void since its adoption. In December 1992, the Congress of People's Deputies of the Russian Federation authorized the Parliament to consider the status of Sevastopol, and on July 9, 1993, to fulfill this mandate, the Russian Parliament announced Russian federal status of Sevastopol according to the Decree "On the status of Sevastopol".

Fundamental belief in the transience of Ukrainian independence has determined Russian policy toward Ukraine since 1991, which is set forth in the corresponding strategic documents. In a public report "Russia - CIS: Does the position of the West need adjusting?" the Foreign Intelligence Service of Russia, then headed by Y. Prymakov, defined scenario of enhancing centripetal processes up to "creating a confederation within the CIS" as optimistic for Russia. This scenario also emphasized the possibility of "transition to a federal system in some countries of the Commonwealth." The report of the Russian intelligence, PGU KGB successor, declared a kind of Russian Monroe Doctrine, or a new edition of the "Brezhnev Doctrine", for the former Soviet Union: the West must coordinate their activity in the former Soviet Union with the Kremlin.

Russian President Boris Yeltsin declared that the main goal of Russia's policy regarding the CIS is "creating an integrated economic and political union of states capable of claiming a rightful place in the

international community”¹. Russian President Vladimir Putin left the goal intact. The Russian strategic document states that "the CIS is the territory of our core vital interests in the field of economy, defense, security, protection of the Russians, which is the basis of national security of the country; effective cooperation with CIS countries is a factor that resists centrifugal tendencies in Russia itself.”² Political and economic stability of the CIS states became dependent on their friendly relations towards Russia.

Crisis processes that determined the political and economic agenda in the Russian Federation during the 1990s (anti-constitutional Yeltsin rebellion of 1993³, that ended in a brutal shooting at the Russian parliament, the overthrow of the constitutional order and mass casualties, genocide of the Chechen people in the 1st and 2nd Chechen war, a number of horrific acts of terrorism, "colonial" wars in Moldova, Tajikistan, Georgia, separatist manifestations in several regions of Russia (North Caucasus republics, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Yakutia, Tuva, Sverdlovsk region, etc.), hyperinflation and catastrophic decline in GDP, default of 1998, total criminalization of society and the state, etc.) determined Russian revanchist strategy for nearly 10 years.

Dealing with complex domestic political and economic problems, the Kremlin had to maintain the illusion of good relations with Ukraine in the 1990s, in particular, on December 5, 1994 the Russian Federation together with the USA and the UK signed the Memorandum on Security Assurances in connection with Ukraine's accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (Budapest Memorandum), under which it undertook to:

respect independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine (Art. 1);

refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine, and that none of their weapons will ever be used against Ukraine except in self-defense or otherwise in accordance with the UN Charter (Art. 2);

refrain from economic coercion designed to subordinate to their own interest the exercise by Ukraine of the rights inherent in its sovereignty and thus to secure advantages of any kind (Art. 3) etc.

In 1997, Ukraine and the Russian Federation concluded the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership, according to which the parties committed themselves to:

respect the territorial integrity of each other and the inviolability of existing borders between them (Art. 2);

build relationships with each other based on the principles of mutual respect of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, inviolability of borders, peaceful settlement of disputes, non-use or threat of force, including economic and other means of pressure, the right of peoples to freely dispose of their own destiny, non-interference in internal affairs, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, cooperation between states, conscientious fulfillment of international obligations, and other universally recognized norms of international law (Art. 3) etc.

¹ Decree of September 14, 1995 № 940 "On Approval of the strategic course of the Russian Federation with the state members of the Commonwealth of Independent States"

² Decree of August 31, 2005 № 1010 "On Repeal of certain provisions of the Decree of the President of Russian Federation of September 14, 1995 № 940 "On Approval of the strategic course of the Russian Federation with the state members of the Commonwealth of Independent States”

³ The Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation, chaired by V.Zorkin, who continues to head the institution, by its decision of September 21, 1993 № 3-2 considered actions and decisions of the Russian president as unconstitutional and as having a reason for the removal from office of President of the Russian Federation "or actuation of other special mechanisms of his accountability." On September 24, 1993 X Congress of People's Deputies of the Russian Federation regarded the action of the RF president as a government rebellion and reached a decision to terminate his powers. Since then, we should regard the RF leadership's use of the principle of legitimacy, including for evaluating events in Ukraine, not from legal, but only from propagandist positions.

The line of the state border, which the Russian Federation pledged to respect, was specified on the maps in 2003 by the Agreement between Ukraine and the Russian Federation on the Ukrainian-Russian state border. However, over the coming years, Russia strongly hampered the process of demarcation of the state border with Ukraine, i.e. its indication on the ground.

After the new Russian government, headed by Putin, slowed down disintegration processes in Russia and securely galvanized the economic and political elite by "carrot and stick" methods, they moved to imminent implementation of international revenge strategies. The first task was to test the reaction of the US and its allies. For this purpose, Russia resorted to the use of power tools against Ukraine (October 2003 - crisis around the island of Tuzla, January 2006 and January 2009 - "gas wars") and Georgia (the war of 08.08.08). Following these events, the Kremlin formed a persistent idea that the elite of Western countries, especially in Europe, have "Munich Syndrome" - the readiness to make concessions to the aggressor at the expense of states of the Baltic-Black Sea-Caspian region. The passive reaction of Western countries to Russian provocations significantly contributed to the formation of the Russian leadership's conviction of their impunity, and actually encouraged the Kremlin to aggressive actions against the former Soviet and "socialist camp" states.

The Orange Revolution of 2004 became a turning point for Putin, because the Russian national leader took it as a personal defeat. After it, the Russian leadership worked out scenarios that would be used 10 years later. In particular, in 2004 Russia first tried the scenario of "Eastern Ukrainian" separatism. On November 26, 2004 Luhansk regional council voted to create the South-Eastern Republic. On November 28, the Congress of deputies of all levels from 17 regions of Ukraine, mainly eastern and southern, was held in Severodonetsk, Luhansk region. It was attended by a representative delegation from Russia, led by Moscow Mayor Y. Luzhkov. There they discussed the creation of a South-Eastern federal state with its capital in Kharkiv.

In April 2008, during the NATO Summit in Bucharest, Putin said to US President George W. Bush: "Ukraine - this is not a state. Part of its territory is Eastern Europe, another part, and quite a big one, was our present ... if Ukraine joins NATO, it will remain without Crimea and the East - it will just fall apart." Such ideas formed the basis of the Russian strategic vision on a new phase of expansion, which probably was formulated at a joint meeting of the Security Council and RF State Council on December 25, 2008.

The corresponding principles, directly or in a veiled form, were enshrined in the Russian strategic documents on foreign and security policy - the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation, Russian Foreign Policy Concept, the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, and the Concept of Long-Term Social and Economic Development of the Russian Federation.

To implement the Kremlin strategy, Russian state authorities created a comprehensive system of compelling the CIS states to unite. The system includes tools of politico-diplomatic, economic, especially energy, propaganda and, if necessary, military pressure with the extensive use of subversion technologies, theoretically developed and practically tested during the time of Stalin's Soviet Union.

The "hybrid warfare" paradigm, which had been theoretically developed and practically tested, was to become a part of this complex pressure system. Modern Russian official understanding of this paradigm was outlined in the report of the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation General V. Gerasimov at the general meeting of the Academy of Military Sciences of the Russian Federation in January 2013.

An important direction of Russian policy towards Ukraine is subversion. In 2006, the FSB established a unit for activities in social networks ("Centre 18"). Russian special services intensified creating intelligence networks in Ukraine. Numerous structures of Russian influence of the whole political spectrum - from rightwing and clerical to communist - began their activities. After 2004, the Russian secret services formed an extensive network of anti-Ukrainian organizations in the south-eastern regions and Crimea which were controlled or even led by Russian agents - the structures of the Party of Regions, the Communist Party, the Progressive Socialist Party, the "Rodina" Party, the "Russian Unity", various Orthodox groups focused on the "Russian world" ideas, separatist

political groups ("The Donetsk Republic"), criminalized paramilitary formations (Cossack formations, fight clubs, especially in Crimea, the "Oplot" organization, security structures that were actively used during the Revolution of Dignity, the so-called "titushky"). Most of these groups did not have broad public support, but they actively interacted with law enforcement bodies in times of the Yanukovych regime.

From 2008, the Kremlin launched propaganda preparation for aggression against Ukraine. Propaganda campaigns and special information operations were implemented in print media, on television, on the Internet. Various books about the future Russian-Ukrainian war were published. The ideological basis of Russian propaganda was the "Russian World" concept, formed in 1970 among the Moscow liberal intelligentsia (the M. Gefter circle) and taken up in 2010's by Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church (V. Gundyayev).

Russian propaganda covered three main target audiences: Western, Ukrainian and Russian. The main objective in the West was to "prove" that the Ukrainian nation is artificial and the Ukrainian state is doomed because it has never been a success. Among Ukrainians, they spread myths about the eternal unity with the Russian people, the so-called "triune, artificially divided Russian people," the benefits of joining either the modern Russian Empire or the USSR-2 "under the brilliant leadership of Vladimir Putin". At the same time, they "proved" that Ukrainian elites are unable to govern an independent state, highlighted their corruption, failure to find a compromise and so on. Russian society was infected with ideas of chauvinism, imperial superiority, other nations' inferiority compared to "the most spiritual" Russian people, Orthodox fundamentalism, fascism, etc. Russian propaganda did not hesitate to spread the most brutal lies. Only Russian politicians and diplomats could compete with propagandists.

Russian cultural policy in the Ukrainian direction was fully integrated into the overall strategy of eliminating Ukrainian statehood. Russian propaganda widely used not only the media but also the culture and entertainment industries: cinema, showbusiness, allegedly non-political "cultural" television and radio programs, the Internet and so on. Russian cultural expansion against Ukraine was carried out deliberately and persistently throughout the years of independence, aided by ineffective humanitarian and cultural policy.

Russian energy policy had similar objectives. In 2009, the second "gas war" resulted in forming powerful Russian pressure on Ukraine in the energy sector, creating opportunities for financial depletion of the economy⁴. Primarily, as a tool to gain influence in Ukraine, they used politically motivated and economically unjustified projects of "North" and "South" streams - channels for exporting corruption to the European Union⁵.

Throughout the years of Ukrainian independence, Russia used all its available arsenal of subversive devices to feed anti-Ukrainian, anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiments among the population of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol. Deliberately ignoring the will of the Crimean people during the nationwide referendum on December 1, 1991⁶, the Crimean authorities in the early 1990s made several attempts to secede from Ukraine (1992, 1994-1995). However, this scenario did not have wide support among the peninsula's population. Russia-provoked separatist manifestations were prevented due to the coordinated efforts of the state leadership and the security and defense sector.

⁴ In 2010-2013, the negative balance of Ukrainian payments was rapidly growing (2010 - \$ 3.0 bln, \$10.2 billion, \$14.3 billion, \$16.5 billion, and in general during the presidency of V. Yanukovych - \$44 billion).

⁵ Corruption factors play a special role in the Russian foreign policy strategy, and corrupt schemes are often implemented with full assistance of senior management of state secret services of Russia.

⁶ The Act of Independence of Ukraine was confirmed by 54.19% of the inhabitants of Crimea and 57.07% - of Sevastopol.

Having realized that separatist ideas lack active mass support⁷, the Kremlin put their hopes into Crimean criminals. Incomplete decriminalization of Crimea, which started in 1995, led to penetration of crime into the state (including law enforcement) agencies, which often served criminal groups. After all, the Crimean organizations of the Party of Regions and the Communist Party, which were criminalized to the backbone, became a reliable pillar of Russian influence and played a key role during the Russian aggression and subsequent occupation⁸.

Since the late 1980s, when the Crimean Tatar people began returning to Crimea, the Kremlin exploited and fueled interethnic strife between ethnic Russians and the indigenous people of Crimea – the Crimean Tatars. They pulled out all the stops in order to escalate xenophobic sentiments among Russian-speaking residents of Crimea. After the illegal annexation of Crimea, this policy logically developed into the deployment of large-scale persecution of Crimean Tatars and other social groups on ethnic and religious grounds.

One of the key factors of the anti-Ukrainian policy of Russia in Crimea and later illegal occupation of the peninsula was the Russian Federation Black Sea Fleet (BSF RF). According to a number of agreements signed by Ukraine and Russia from 1994 to 1997⁹, Ukraine leased out to Russia for a 20-year term a number of sites in the city of Sevastopol, the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Henichesk (Kherson region), for stationing of the fleet. According to the agreements, the Russian Federation could hold up to 25,000 military personnel in Crimea and it undertook not to deploy nuclear weapons. Over the whole period of the BSF RF being stationed in Ukraine, Russia was actually blocking the attempts to finally normalize the conditions of temporary stationing of the fleet, systematically violated its obligations and did not allow representatives of Ukrainian state authorities to visit the sites of the BSF RF temporary stationing in order to make an inventory of the leased property and land. The leased facilities were used as a basis to conduct reconnaissance and subversive, information and propaganda, as well as other anti-Ukrainian activities.

In 2008, complex preparations for the armed aggression against Ukraine began. Units of the Russian military intelligence carried out reconnaissance of the future theater of operations in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. After 2010, the "reenactment movement" significantly intensified in the territory of East and South Ukraine. It was used by the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and the FSB for the disguised study and preparation of Ukrainian areas for warfare.

After the military conflict with Georgia in August 2008, the military and political leadership of Russia conducted analysis of the major deficiencies that were identified during the warfare and began intensive work in order to eliminate them. Large-scale military reform became the main area of the Russian authorities' concern. The reform radically changed the approach to the development and use of armed forces. Special attention was focused on:

changes in the regulatory and legal framework in the field of defense and security both at the national level (the new edition of the Federal Law "On Defense" and the Military Doctrine of Russia) and conceptual departmental regulations (military statutes of the Armed Forces);

improving and developing scientific and technological potential, in particular, creating modern instrumentation and control systems, including automated control systems, communications and intelligence;

⁷ The pro-Russian party "Russian Unity" headed by S.Aksyonov won the elections to the Crimean Verkhovna Rada in 2010 with only 4.02% of the vote.

⁸ As well as in Russia itself, criminals remain the mainstay of Russian occupation authorities in Crimea (the Russian leadership appointed S.Aksyonov ("Goblin") who came from "Salem", one of the most brutal Crimean organized criminal groups, "head" of Crimea, and V. Konstantinov, the leader of "Consol" structure, head of the Crimean "parliament").

⁹ In particular, the Agreement between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on the status and conditions of the RF Black Sea Fleet's stay on Ukrainian territory (1997)

creating new military associations, formations and units¹⁰.

An important feature of the operational and combat training of the RF Armed Forces and of other special events was uniting individual elements, which were held in various regions of Russia and Belarus and at different times, by a single idea. According to the annual report of the NATO Secretary General in 2015, over the past three years Russia held at least 18 large-scale military training exercises. Some of them involved more than 100,000 service personnel. In particular, they modeled nuclear attacks on NATO member states and partner states. Moreover, trainings were used to disguise the mass movement of troops in preparation for the illegal annexation of Crimea and aggression in eastern Ukraine.

Russia practically applied the military aggression scenario against Ukraine during a joint strategic training (JST) of the Armed Forces of the RF and Belarus "West-2013" (September 19-28, 2013). The content of the training plan is worth special attention: *"The political crisis in the neighboring country resulted in intensified activities of the opposition movement. With support of third parties, the opposition tried to move to drastic action. Armed groups of opposition forces were formed in areas of compact residence of ethnic minorities. They started armed confrontation with pro-government forces on the basis of ethnic and ethnoreligious conflicts. In order to discredit the legitimate authority to the international community, the opposition forces resorted to provocations. The opposition continued to receive full support from the Western powers and called for international intervention in the internal political conflict. On the other hand, pro-government forces tried to restore constitutional order in the country on their own. If the situation worsened, it could trigger a wave of defiance in the RF as well. According to the intergovernmental agreements between Russia and the neighboring country, the Russian component of Regional (Interspecific) groupings of troops (forces) was transferred to its territory. In the future, this grouping conducted military operations for neutralizing illegal military formations and preventing new military formations from penetrating into the country. "*

This is the scenario which they planned to apply in order to annex Crimea and deploy armed aggression against Ukraine. When comparing the tactical formation of Russian troops during the "West-2013" military exercises and the tactical formation of RF Armed Forces involved in the Donetsk operations line from August to October 2014, we can observe an identical approach. This clearly proves that the occupation of Crimea was only part of the overall plan of a full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine. The bloody conflict in Crimea, triggered by the Russian secret services and armed forces, had to provide political and propagandistic reasons for the Russian troops to invade Ukrainian eastern and southern regions, as it had been the case in August 2008 in the South Ossetia region of Georgia.

Over the years, the Ukrainian government, being under pressure from both Russia and Western countries, considered defense issues to be less important. Reform of the army was limited mainly to its reduction in force and effective combat strength. Weapons and military equipment were not upgraded either. In particular, Air Defense System potential massively fell. The domestic military-industrial complex suffered large-scale destruction. Combat training was reduced to a minimum, military administration bodies lost their efficiency, and military personnel lost their combat skills. Idealistic, pacifist ideas about the Armed Forces and other military units being only rudimentary attributes of the state that will never be used to protect Ukraine were spread. And these ideas were aggressively enforced.

When V. Yanukovich, the Party of Regions and the criminal-oligarchic group which they led, came to almost monopolist power, the Kremlin received new opportunities to intensify its influence on Ukraine. Thus, in April 2010, Viktor Yanukovich and Dmitry Medvedev signed the Kharkiv agreements, which extended the term of

¹⁰ Thus, in December 2011, a new 49th field army, with headquarters in the city of Stavropol, was formed to conduct combat operations in the Azov-Black Sea sector as part of the Southern District of the Armed Forces. The number of military personnel was about 35 thousand people; they were armed with 350 tanks, up to 1,000 combat armored vehicles, 180 cannons and mortars, 100 MLRS "Grad", 220 anti-aircraft artillery and anti-aircraft missile systems.

the RF Black Sea Fleet's stay in Ukraine until 2042. According to D. Medvedev, the agreement also envisaged the second, economic phase, but its implementation was postponed. Their signing actually launched immediate preparations for the Russian operation on establishing full control over Ukraine. In June 2010, Ukraine announced its non-aligned policy, i.e. rejection of Euro-Atlantic integration while preserving a declarative European integration course.

As it became clear only later, V. Yanukovich and his inner circle did not and could not consider European integration as a strategic goal of Ukraine. They used the policy of rapprochement with the EU to flirt with the pro-European majority of Ukrainian society and as a means to manipulate pro-European political forces and in the external dimension - for shameless and cynical bargaining¹¹. The apotheosis of trading Ukraine's national interests was an agreement with Putin about getting a \$15 billion loan from Russia and a number of other economic preferences for associated businesses in exchange for a refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the EU.

The RF leadership took advantage of the opportunities which V. Yanukovich gave them and moved on to implement the decisive stage of their strategy for conquering Ukraine. This complex, multivariate strategy included at least two basic scenarios. According to the first one, the main task was to subordinate the whole of Ukraine mainly by legal political and economic methods, which had to ensure, firstly, the political isolation of Ukraine from the West, and secondly, its adherence to the integration projects led by the Russian Federation (the Customs and Eurasian Unions) and the CSTO. Along with the first scenario, they rehearsed the second, backup script in case they lost control over the Ukrainian leadership, which provided for the strategic Chekist-military operation in order to seize Ukrainian south-eastern regions and Crimea.

The Russian strategy was based on a clear understanding of the nature of the regime that came to power in Ukraine in 2010. State officials declared tasks for European integration, strengthening practical cooperation with the West and strengthening the security and defense sector in official documents, including the Law of Ukraine "On the Foundations of Domestic and Foreign Policy" (June 2010), the National Security Strategy (June, 2012), Messages from the President of Ukraine to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (2010, 2011, 2012). But in fact, they systematically and deliberately sabotaged their implementation. Instead, V. Yanukovich and his entourage formed a systemic corrupt environment and, in close cooperation with Russia, created on this basis their own oligarchic clan - the so-called "Family."

Despite the fact that the Donetsk criminal-oligarchic clan captured political power in Ukraine, it was at this particular time when the formation of a separate "regional identity" intensified in Donetsk and Luhansk regions. This task was realized by Donetsk and Luhansk corrupt establishment under the banners of the corresponding regional organizations of the Party of Regions, the Communist Party and other pro-Russian forces, including out of public funds (for example, the regional target program "Patriot of Luhansk region" for 2011 - 2014, approved by the decision of the Luhansk regional council on February 25, 2011 № 3/12).

When Viktor Yanukovich won the presidential elections of 2010, Russian agents began rapid penetration into the senior management of the national security system of Ukraine. Almost simultaneous appointment of figures closely linked with Russian secret services to key posts in the defense and security sector is very indicative. Noteworthy are D. Salamatin (February 2012) and P. Lebedyev (December 2012) appointment as Minister of Defense of Ukraine, O. Yakymenko – as Head of the Security Service of Ukraine (January 2013). Now these and other former Ukrainian high officials are hiding in Russian-controlled territory.

Russia and its secret service agents in Ukrainian state bodies took systematic measures for disorganizing the Ukrainian defense and security sector. It was in the times of the V. Yanukovich regime that a knock-down strike was made at the defenses of Ukraine. Defense needs were poorly funded at 1% of GDP. Yanukovich, his

¹¹ Over the peaceful 2010-2013, public and publicly guaranteed debt of Ukraine increased by more than 267 billion UAH, or by 84%, including the external debt – by more than 11 billion USD (42%).

environment and linked businesses diverted significant amounts of those extremely scarce funds. Development of the Armed Forces was not actually financed.

Disorganization of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine under the guise of “reform” made the effective management of the Armed Forces of Ukraine impossible¹². In 2010, the Joint Operational Command was disbanded, and a year later – the Support Forces Command, which greatly complicated the use of capabilities of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Inherently destructive "reformation" of regional (city) military commissariats was completed. From 2010, training operations were suspended. It was in the times of the Yanukovich regime that the destruction of the Ukrainian air defense system was nearly completed. The latest anti-aircraft missile systems and aerial reconnaissance platforms were relocated to Crimea. Units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine and other security and defense sector units were staffed mostly by local residents with complete disregard for the extraterritoriality principle.

The Azarov government decision (Order of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine № 503 dated July 3, 2013) became the symbolic act of humiliation of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Under this decision, the historic buildings of the National Defense University named after I. Chernyakhovsky were transferred to the Specialized Higher Court of Ukraine for Civil and Criminal Cases.

The main goal of sudden and unjustified trade restrictions imposed by Russia against Ukraine in the summer of 2013 and the corresponding propaganda campaign in the media was to give V. Yanukovich and his government the grounds to justify the future refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the EU in the eyes of Ukrainian society and Western partners. The armed provocations near the borders of Ukraine pursued the same goals¹³.

In November 2013, ostentatious treacherous actions of Yanukovich provoked mass protests in Kyiv and other cities of Ukraine. Initially, the Kremlin considered the protests as a chance to undermine the potential of Ukraine's resistance to aggressive Russian plans rather than as a threat to the pro-Russian puppet regime. The confrontation¹⁴ escalation coincided in time with the growing awareness of the Russian leadership of prospects to lose control. It is obvious that the same strategy that had been elaborated for counteracting the Bolotnaya' protest movement in 2004-2005 in Russia was also used at “anti-maidans” in Ukraine. It is precisely these "anti-maidans" that later became the organizational basis for separatism manifestations in Crimea, eastern and southern regions of Ukraine.

The government's actions before and during the events that later became known as the Revolution of Dignity led to a rapid deterioration of Ukraine's relations with the US and EU. However, according to Putin and Yanukovich agreements reached during their meeting on December 17, 2013 in Moscow, the implementation of the second economic phase of the Kharkiv agreements began. The agreements envisaged measures for integrating the energy, financial, defense-industrial and aerospace sectors of Ukraine and Russia. Besides, preparation for Ukraine's accession to the Customs Union began. Taken as a whole, it meant that Ukraine lost direct contact with the West and became subordinated to the Kremlin. That is, Yanukovich and his entourage took the direct path to depriving Ukraine of its state sovereignty and independence.

Supported by the Kremlin leadership and Russian intelligence services, the Yanukovich regime made repeated attempts to drown the mass protests in blood, which led to armed provocations and escalation of violence in Kyiv. Many participants of Euromaidan were killed. In the second half of February 2014, the regime began to lose control of the situation.

¹² Over 21 months, from December 1, 2011 to August 30, 2013, fourteen orders on changes in the structure of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine were issued.

¹³ On August 17, 2013, the motor boat of the RF FSB Border Service fired at the Ukrainian fishing vessel; 4 fishermen were killed and 1 was captured.

¹⁴ Brutal beating of students in Independence Square in Kyiv in the night on November 30, 2013, an attempt to disperse the Euromaidan on December 9-10, 2013, the adoption of repressive laws against civil rights ("dictatorial laws") on January 16, 2014, murders and kidnapping of protesters after January 19, 2014, armed clashes on February 18-20, 2014.

After the attempts to destroy the protest movement on February 18, 2014, and the use of firearms against protesters, on February 21, at 16:52, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopted the law renewing the constitutional provisions of 2004 (№ 4163) to avoid further bloodshed. 386 deputies of Ukraine voted for this law. But Viktor Yanukovich, instead of immediately signing the law, at 22:40 fled from Kyiv. Previously, he had taken away the most valuable things from his residence in Mezhyhirya. Simultaneously with him, senior management of the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Revenue and Duties, Security Service, Prosecutor General's Office, and many other central executive authorities, regional and district state administrations left their jobs and fled too. Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine Volodymyr Rybak and his deputy I. Kalyetnik resigned. All this plunged the Ukrainian state into a legal vacuum. Undoubtedly, these actions were coordinated with the Kremlin, which pursued the aim to paralyze public institutions in Ukraine and thus prevent organized opposition to Russian aggression.

Thus, at this critical point of the active phase of the strategic Chekist-military operations of Russia against Ukraine in Crimea, the East and South of Ukraine (February 20-22, 2014) military-political leadership of the state, top military echelon of the Armed Forces, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Security Service and other authorities of the security and defense sector of Ukraine actually disappeared. As a result of previous actions of the Yanukovich regime Ukraine's defense potential was at critically low level. Security and defense sector personnel were demoralized and lost the ability to fulfill orders and resist armed aggression.

In circumstances when the President of Ukraine, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich removed himself from fulfilling his constitutional powers of the state sovereignty and territorial integrity guarantor, the Ukrainian parliament took full responsibility for the fate of Ukraine and did their utmost to restore constitutional order and administration of state affairs. On February 22, 2014, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine elected O. Turchynov Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine and restored the provisions of the Constitution of Ukraine, which had been unconstitutionally abolished in 2010. Since Yanukovich removed himself from executing the duties of President, under the Constitution of Ukraine, powers of the President of Ukraine were conferred on O. Turchynov, Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. In a short time the new leadership of the security and defense sector was appointed, then the new Government of Ukraine was fully formed, and the activity of executive power in Kyiv and regions was restored.

Just before the strategic Chekist-military operation began, in the summer of 2013, the Kremlin had started direct preparation for the illegal annexation of Crimea and aggression in eastern Ukraine. From November 2013 to February 2014, pro-Russian forces were consolidated, illegal military groups were organized ("self-defense" groups), and the political and organizational infrastructure for the peninsula occupation was created in Crimea. Among other preparations for annexation, Russia took practical measures. The task forces were deployed in the Southern military district of the RF Armed Forces to ensure the safety of the 2014 Winter Olympic Games. The forces were several times greater than needed for reasons of sporting event security.

Russia stepped up intelligence service activity in Ukraine. In the second half of 2013, the number of the RF reconnaissance aircraft overflights over Ukraine's territory was some orders of magnitude greater compared to previous periods. It was at that time that the work of agents in Ukraine, as well as electronic warfare and imagery intelligence activity against our country was stepped up.

According to a pre-prepared plan, starting from February 20, 2014 (before Yanukovich escaped from Kyiv)¹⁵, meetings under separatist slogans were organized in Sevastopol and Simferopol. Citizens of the Russian Federation played the leading role in them. Along with agents of the FSB, Main Intelligence Directorate of the Russian General Staff, External Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation, and their combat forces, Russian citizens including sportsmen, security firm employees and ex-servicemen were specially brought to Crimea to

¹⁵ The departmental distinction of the Ministry of Defense - Medal "For the return of Crimea" - bears the date 02.20.2014 - 03.18.2014, indicating that the operation had begun before Yanukovich escaped and the Revolution of Dignity finished.

participate in those events. They acted as "angry Crimeans," provoked conflicts, and tried hard to destabilize the situation.

At night, on February 27, 2014, the Russian special forces seized administrative buildings of the parliament and government of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. On February 28, 2014, deputies of the Verkhovna Rada of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, at gunpoints of "green men", with flagrant violations of the procedure, took a decision to call a referendum on Crimea status and appointed S. Aksyonov head of the Crimean government. From that day on, the RF Armed Forces units took control over critical infrastructure facilities, airports, passes, and bridges. They started blocking Ukrainian military units and facilities on the peninsula, and suddenly seized some them. The first facilities to be seized were Ukrainian telecommunications. In early March 2014, occupation units terminated Ukrainian television broadcasting on the peninsula.

Immediately after Yanukovich's escape, the employees of the Main Departments of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Security Service of Ukraine in Crimea and Main Departments of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Security Service of Ukraine in Sevastopol began sabotaging orders from Kyiv. Out of 20,000 military of the Armed Forces, Security Service, Department of the State Guard, internal-security troops and intelligence agencies stationed in Crimea, only 6,000 moved from the occupied peninsula to the other territory of Ukraine. However, despite the numerical superiority of Russian aggressors, fierce psychological pressure and blocking of military units, some units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine held steady defense and left the peninsula only after receiving the corresponding order on March 24, 2014.

In such circumstances Russia actually completed the peninsula's occupation in the first 10 days of March due to rapid increase of the military groupings, the combat potential of which far exceeded that of the Ukrainian troops stationed in Crimea.

In A. Kondrashov's documentary "Crimea. The Road to the Homeland" (March, 2015) Putin said he was ready to use nuclear weapons during occupation operations in Crimea in case the West interfered. He also informed that he had personally led the military operation, during which Russian marines and task forces of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Russian General Staff blocked Ukrainian military units. Besides, Putin admitted that the units of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Russian General Staff held a special operation to destroy the channels of special communication of Ukrainian units with Kyiv. The film also informs about the fact that the radio-electronic military system of coastal missile system "Bastion" was used to switch off the radar of US destroyer "Donald Cook," which was in the Black Sea.

The Decree of the President of Ukraine of March 7, 2014 № 261 suspended the Resolution of the Verkhovna Rada of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea of March 6, 2014 № 1702-6/14 "On holding the all-Crimean referendum." The Constitutional Court of Ukraine ruled that the referendum does not comply with the Constitution of Ukraine. However, on March 16, 2014, "referendum" on the ARC independence was held contrary to Ukrainian and international law. None of the universally accepted standards of popular will expression was observed. The so-called "international observers" whom the Russian occupation authorities allowed to participate in the "referendum" were representatives of the ultra-right, neo-Nazi, communist European parties and other persons of Nazi and neostalinist¹⁶ views.

While the peninsula's native population - Crimean Tatars - boycotted the referendum and numerous Russian armed military were present on the peninsula, the referendum in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea allegedly collected more than 1.2 million completed ballots (which is 83.10% of all voters). Of them 96.77%

¹⁶ In fact, the international community strongly condemned the RF aggression against Ukraine and Russia and flagrant violations of international law. On March 27, 2014, the UN General Assembly, by an absolute majority of its members, adopted resolution № 68/262 on support of the territorial integrity of Ukraine. In March 2014, the EU, US, Canada, Australia and several other countries imposed sanctions on Russia as the aggressor state.

allegedly voted for "reunification of Crimea with Russia as a subject of the Russian Federation¹⁷." As is known, numerous instances of such "mass support" are typical for the RF electoral system over the past 20 years.

On March 18, 2014 in Moscow, Russian President Vladimir Putin, the self-proclaimed "head of the Council of Ministers of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea" S. Aksyonov," speaker of the Verkhovna Rada of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea" V. Konstantinov and self-proclaimed mayor of Sevastopol A. Chaly signed the Treaty on the adoption of the Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol to Russia. At the ceremonial meeting V. Putin made a speech in which he once again stressed that Ukrainians and Russians are one people and said: "millions of Russian people, Russian-speaking citizens are living and will be living in Ukraine, and Russia will always defend their interests... "

This statement was made during the second phase of the strategic Chekist-military operation - seizing southern and eastern regions of Ukraine. In February 23, 2014, a meeting was held in Moscow at which the deputy chairman of the State Duma of the RF Federal Assembly V. Zhyrynovskyy urged that Ukraine be divided into three parts and Russian "volunteers" be sent to Ukraine who had to declare a state "Malorossiya" with its capital in Kharkiv. The Russian press stirred up mass hysteria under the slogans "fascist coup in Kyiv", "illegal Kyiv junta", and "the urgent need to defend the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine from furious Bandera followers-fascists." This propaganda campaign of different levels of intensity still persists.

On February 28, 2014 the RF armed forces started a "surprise combat readiness check" of the Southern military district and the Black Sea Fleet. The Western military district units were also attracted. 150 thousand servicemen, 90 aircraft, 120 helicopters, and 880 tanks were involved. Since March 1, 2014, strike units were deployed in Rostov, Voronezh, Kursk, Belgorod, and Bryansk regions of Russia. A strike grouping was formed for such tactical directions as Polissya, Slobozhanshyna, Donetsk and Crimea in close vicinity of the borders of Ukraine. It was put on full combat alert to invade Ukraine at least until the end of May 2014. Moscow put armed forces on full combat alert to invade the territory of Ukraine from east and south.

To justify Moscow's military intervention in Crimea, the Kremlin used the letter sent by Ukraine's ousted leader Viktor Yanukovich to Russian President Vladimir Putin on March 1, 2014. On March 4, 2014, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vitaly Churkin said at the UNSC meeting: "Today, I am authorized to inform the following. "The President of Russia has received the following from president Yanukovich and I quote: 'As the legitimately elected President of Ukraine, I say the events in Kyiv have resulted in the fact that Ukraine is on the brink of civil war. The country has plunged into chaos and anarchy. The lives and security of people particularly in Crimea and south-east are being threatened. Under the influence of Western countries there have been open acts of terror and violence. People have been persecuted for their language and political reasons. So in this regard I would call on the President of Russia, Mr. Putin, asking him to use the armed forces of the Russian Federation to establish legitimacy, peace, law and order, stability and defend the people of Ukraine. Viktor Yanukovich, March 1, 2014'".

On the same day, the self-proclaimed "head of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea" S. Aksyonov made a similar appeal. V. Putin immediately requested the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation to use the Army in Ukraine, because there is "a threat to the lives of citizens of the Russian Federation and the personnel of the armed forces of the Russian Federation on Ukrainian territory." A few hours later, the Federation Council unanimously supported the proposal of the Russian president.

On March 11, 2014, the beginning of the "largest drills of the last 20 years" of airborne troops of Russia was announced. According to an officially sounded legend, the drills included a massive airdrop involving 3,500 servicemen at the rear of the "imaginary enemy". Commanders were informed about the landing site only on board the plane. During the drills 1,500 paratroopers landed in a military training area in Rostov region of the RF in the close vicinity of the border with Ukraine.

¹⁷ The scale of fraud is attested by the fact that as of November 1, 2013, the population of Sevastopol was 383,499 people, whereas 474,137 people, which is 123% of the population, supported the accession to Russia in the referendum.

Since March 1, 2014, a series of protests in eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, the so-called "Russian Spring", began under the slogans of joining the south and east of Ukraine to Russia. It was coordinated and controlled by Russian intelligence services. Under this cover, specially trained assault groups led by Russian officers attempted to seize administrative buildings in Kharkiv, Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia, Mykolaiv, Kherson, Odessa, Dnipropetrovsk regions. The buildings of regional administrations in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv and the Security Service departments in Donetsk and Luhansk were seized.

Thus, the facts conclusively demonstrate thorough preparation for large-scale encroachment on the territory of Ukraine for the restoration of the puppet regime of Yanukovich. Bloodshed in Crimea was to become a reason for this encroachment.

Realizing the gravity of the situation, the new Ukrainian leadership began the redeployment of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and law enforcement agencies to the eastern and southern regions of the state. The leadership took urgent measures to restore the capacity of the security and defense sector, to administer capabilities of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, to establish the National Guard, to carry out partial mobilization. Volunteer battalions for defending Ukraine began their formation. The situation in Kyiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhia, Mykolaiv, Kharkiv and Kherson regions was quickly stabilized. After a murderous provocation organized by pro-Russian forces on May 2, 2014 in Odessa did not achieve its goal, the threat to civil peace was eliminated in Odessa region as well. Systematic measures were taken to attract international support for Ukraine's efforts to deter the Russian aggressor¹⁸.

The RF's aggression was rebuffed defiantly. A broad patriotic movement rose up throughout Ukraine. Heroism of soldiers, volunteers and ordinary citizens foiled plans for occupying eight southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, and the Russian aggressor had to switch over to the hidden subversive and terrorist activities in Ukraine, excluding Donetsk and Luhansk regions. But even in these regions the attack of the terrorist Russian troops was localized.

On May 25, 2014, in extremely difficult circumstances, a free, democratic, internationally recognized presidential election was held. Petro Poroshenko won an election by a large margin.

These events finally proved the failure of the Russian blitzkrieg plans against Ukraine. The enemy was stopped by joint efforts of society and reviving the state at a high cost of the lives of thousands of Ukrainians. Then the next phase of Russian aggression against Ukraine began - hybrid warfare that still persists.

¹⁸ By armed aggression against Ukraine and Crimea annexation, Russia flagrantly violated international law and undermined the foundations of the European and global security. According to UN General Assembly resolution № 3314 (XXIX) of December 14, 1974, these actions are qualified as an act of aggression. It deliberately and defiantly ignored the provisions of the UN Charter, the Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations between States under the UN Charter of 1965, the Declaration on the inadmissibility of intervention and interference in the internal affairs of States of 1982, the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe of 1975, Founding Act between NATO and Russia of 1997. Unpredictable behavior of a large nuclear power that refuses to adhere to international law and its own commitments, and openly despises state borders, has opened "Pandora's box", struck a devastating blow to the world order established after the Second World War.