

## **Civilizational divide**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in the early morning of February 24, 2022 from several directions simultaneously was, in Moscow's mind, intended to be a quick and spectacular success — not so much militarily as politically. The Kremlin authorities hoped that a large part of Ukraine's population (and certainly its eastern part) would rejoice, seeing the Russian army enter their country. The soldiers themselves, not retaining sufficient precautions, were convinced of the development of the situation. The columns were moving forward in close order, confidently heading towards Kiev. Possible resistance was expected at most in western Ukraine, from which Moscow could eventually even give up in exchange for returning to normal, post-war economic relations with Europe and the rest of the democratic world.

Russia's rapid military success was also expected by a significant number of Western countries. It seems that in the early days of the war, even the United States were not convinced of the durability of the Ukrainian defense. First of all, they wanted to evacuate President Volodymyr Zelensky from Kiev in order to be able to use him in the subsequent stages of the political dispute in the peace negotiations with Moscow. The evacuation proposal put forward by the President of the United States, Joe Biden, that met with Zelensky's sarcastic, but very accurate from the PR point of view response, that "he does not need a ride, but ammunition so he can defend himself," did not leave any illusions about what role the President of Ukraine was to play in Washington's plans. At most, he was perceived as a Western Viktor Yanukovich. The Germans were even more skeptical about the Ukrainian defense capabilities — in the first days of the conflict they did not even hide their plans to quickly accept Ukraine as an undisputed Russian sphere of influence and their desire to return to normalized economic relations with Russia.

However, the situation changed completely after the first three days of the war. Eastern Ukraine did not surrender, and the march of Russian troops on Kiev from the north was also being halted with success. It was not only the army that resisted, but the Ukrainian people as well. Ukrainian territorial defense units began to be rapidly developed. The hostilities did not even reach the western territories of the invaded state — the Russian troops were stopped in the Russian-speaking east.

Thus, one can rise a question: where did not only Russian, but also western politicians and analysts supporting them make a mistake? With what moral authority were they building the conviction that there would be no public resistance to Russian aggression among a decisive part of the Ukrainian population?

The answer is up there in the widely shared political concept that a civilizational divide runs through Ukraine, splitting the country into two: the western Catholic-Protestant civilization and the eastern Orthodox-Russian civilization. This concept is not new, in Poland it has been known since modern times. It was the basis for emphasizing the political belonging of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, created by the union of Poland and Lithuania, to this part of the Latin-Protestant Europe. Thus, from this point of view, the eastern lands of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (first Orthodox, and then Uniate from 1596) were also regarded as part of Europe under the Latin culture, which distinguished them from the lands lying further east, under the influence of Orthodox-Russian civilization. Historically, this division was sanctioned by the Pereiaslav Agreement of 1654, which placed eastern Ukraine, including Kiev, under the control of Moscow, while its western part remained within the borders of the

Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In the area of the Ukrainian lands, not even the collapse of the Polish state in 1795 was able to change that cultural division. As a result of the partitions, the western part of Ukraine became part of the Austrian Empire, unlike the Lithuanian or Belarusian lands, which the Russia annexed in their entirety. This allowed Ukraine to remain within the influence of the Western culture. After the liquidation of the Brest Union (1839) in the land of Belarus, Orthodoxy dominated in the Great Russian Rite. The Austrian Catholic Emperor did not see the need to cancel the religious union maintaining the unity between the Eastern and Latin rites within the Catholic Church in Western Ukraine.

The division of Ukraine into two parts was also preserved after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Indeed, the western part of Ukraine became part of the Polish state, revived in 1918, still remaining primarily within the Western culture. The division of the former eastern lands of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth was sealed after the Polish-Bolshevik war by the treaty signed in March 1921 in Riga. The western part of the Ukrainian and Belarusian lands remained with the Poles. It was not until the armed aggression of September 17, 1939 that the Soviet Union seized the lands of western Ukraine and Belarus, acting in military and political alliance with Nazi Germany. The final annexation of the former eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic to the Soviet Union was sealed by the Yalta Conference arrangements, which validated the new divisions in Central and Eastern Europe after the end of the Second World War.

The preserved division of Ukraine into two parts was also confirmed by Samuel P. Huntington's concept, popular especially at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that divided the world into civilizational circles. As he defined it, a particular cultural circle consisted of such elements as language, religion, customs, social institutions, but above all, the subjective perception of the inhabitants of a particular group perceiving itself as common. Civilizational identity understood in this way was expressed, according to Huntington, both in conflict and in collaboration. As he remarked, '(...) it is culture and cultural identity, which is broadly the identity of a civilization, that shapes patterns of cohesion, disintegration and conflict in the world'.

According to this conception, Ukraine meets all the criteria for being situated at the border of two cultural circles, named by Huntington as the Western civilization and the Orthodox civilization. The first one grows out of the Latin-Protestant heritage, while the second had its roots in the Orthodox religion associated with Russian tsarist autocracy. These divides were clearly visible in the subsequent elections of 2004 or 2010, when the southern and eastern areas of Russian-speaking Ukraine supported Viktor Yanukovich, while the central and western areas stood for Viktor Yushchenko and Yuliya Tymoshenko. Another moment of escalation came in 2013. Due to the resignation of the then Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich from signing the association agreement with EU structures, demonstrations in Kiev took place, which escalated into open conflict the following year. Increasingly radicalizing mindsets only confirmed Huntington's thesis of a civilizational rift, a civilizational divide. The ongoing conflict resulted in Russia's detachment of Crimea from Ukraine, which was subsequently incorporated into the Russian Federation, as well as the proclamation in April 2014 of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics, which, as time passed, declared their desire to merge with Russia in an increasingly open manner.

Is Ukraine thrown back on being permanently torn apart in the future? The ongoing war seems to confirm this theory, but does it actually? The lack of clear Russian successes in Eastern Ukraine might hint at the beginning of changes. The willingness to belong to a particular culture, in addition to one's cultural heritage, is also influenced by the attractiveness of the current civilizational model. The Western world with its technological superiority, availability of the ubiquitous internet and other mass media has in recent years become increasingly more attractive than backward Russia, living under Putin's rule with memories of the greatness of the Soviet Union and the tsarist empire. The latter model has ceased to satisfy the needs of the Ukrainian people. Even living in a state plagued by many economic deficiencies and pervasive corruption, Ukrainians, unlike the citizens of Russia or Belarus, enjoyed incomparably greater democratic freedom. Freedom, combined with Western civilizational progress, has probably indiscernibly shifted the borderline of the civilizational divide more to the east within Ukraine. The ongoing state of war since 2014 has, to the surprise of the vast majority of analysts, only reinforced these processes. The West was not prepared for these transformations. The myth of great, invincible Russia, effectively sustained by Putin's propaganda, obscured the changes taking place.

Old divisions that used to be based on Orthodox culture or the Russian language have lost their meaning in the new, computerized world. A Ukrainian resident who speaks Russian at home does not necessarily have to share the Russian-Putin vision of the world. Great, imperial Russia, still holding true to the 19<sup>th</sup> notion of the *Russian order*, is no longer attractive even to a Russian-speaking resident of Ukraine. A significant part of the Russian elite fails to see this, continuing to build its policy based on the belief in the unique, cohesive role of the Russian language and the heritage of the Orthodox world, which, according to them, should translate into real, territorial expansion of the Russian empire's territory. This might prove to be a mistake.

If not the entire Ukraine, then at least a decisive part of it may be forever lost to the idea of the Russian order. For the first time since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there is a real chance of reversing civilizational trends in the historic lands of Europe's eastern borderlands. According to Huntington's theory of the clash of civilizations, Orthodox culture is not inferior to Western culture. This process is a phenomenon that has only just been initiated, but is becoming more and more permanent, and the war is only accelerating it. Putin with his new face of the new, modern Hitler, in combination with the attempt to resurrect the 19<sup>th</sup> century model of the Orthodox, imperial empire, with nostalgia for the times of the communist empire, becomes more and more repulsive not only in Ukraine but also in Belarus.

What not long ago seemed unrealistic is becoming increasingly apparent — the civilizational divide in eastern Europe is shifting to the east. The modern model of the Russian empire is now losing its attractiveness, while Putin, who used to be regarded as an efficient administrator 15 years ago, is now looking more and more like an ageing despotic tyrant having difficulty to find his balance in the modern world.