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A Broken Heart between Ukraine and Russia

A psychoanalyst's testimony on Ukrainian-Russian relationships



A bombed house in Kiev, morning 25 February 2022

German translation: "Eine zerbrochene Geschichte", Lettre International, 136, Frühjahr 2022, pp. 128-9.

Putin, in just a few years, was able to inadvertently build a masterpiece: the *creation of a strong Ukrainian national sentiment* that had previously seemed to me, a regular visitor, marginal, and limited to a minority.

Today, even those who speak only Russian but live in Ukraine hate Russia. It is not an ancient hatred between the two countries that explains the political decisions of recent years, rather it is the political decisions of recent years that explain this new hatred between the two countries.

On Facebook and other social media, Russian-speaking Ukrainian passport holders write: “This will be my last post in Russian. Henceforth, I will post only in Ukrainian, and we’ll shift to the Ukrainian language even at home”. This is part of Putin’s masterpiece.

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Ukrainian friends tell me that in recent weeks gun shops in the country have been emptied: almost everyone has bought at least one firearm. There are long waiting lists to practice on shooting ranges, which says a lot about Ukrainian’s faith in their army. They take it for granted that Putin, if wanted to, could occupy all of Ukraine in a couple of days. It is therefore better to arm yourself and fight from your home. “People in arms” was Lenin’s ideal, but it is also that of the National Rifle Association (NRA) in the US.

Kids of 5-6 years continue to go to the school in this period, but teachers train them how to reach the nearest shelter in case of a bombardment, cold underground places. I would understand what is stirring in these kids’ heads. And I know that in Dombas schoolchildren are trained to do the same thing: for them, the bombs would come from Ukraine.

Yet the official line of the Ukrainian government up to now had been to play it down, so as not to scare the population. Outside of the big cities, many are unaware that a war could burst out at any moment...

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For twenty years I have had exchanges, which have become daily, with both Russia and Ukraine. I have dear friends in both. I teach at the International Institute of Psychoanalysis in Kyiv and at the Dream Museum in St. Petersburg, I hold seminars, and follow (as a psychoanalyst) Russian and Ukrainian patients, both in person and online.

When I started to frequent Ukraine and Russia around 2000, their differences seemed irrelevant, almost as those between the various Hispanic Latin American countries, for example. Ukrainian colleagues were invited to Russia, and vice versa. At all cultural or scientific events, the only language spoken, even in Ukraine, was Russian. All Ukrainians speak and read Russian, while not all Ukrainians understand Ukrainian well. In fact, many Ukrainians — especially in the east, which includes Kyiv – have always spoken Russian. Ukrainian and Russian, both written in Cyrillic, are close languages, more or less as Italian and Spanish are.

Kyiv has a typically Russian architecture: a combination of white and green, or white and blue, with golden domes (but Ukrainians friends tell me that Russian cities have a typical Ukrainian architecture...). The jewel of the city is the Lavra, a monumental ensemble that dates back to the Middle Ages and contains various Orthodox monasteries. It is a bit like the Vatican City of the Russian Orthodox religion.



Lavra in Kyiv

The real conflict between the two countries began in 2014, when Putin decided to annex Crimea to Russia. Before that, the government in Kiev alternated between pro-European parties and leaders (for an Ukrainian, “Europe” means Western Europe, thus ipso facto excluding Ukraine from “Europe”) and pro-Russian ones. But with the “Maidan” revolution in 2013 and the victory of the pro-European Petro Poroshenko, Putin thought that Ukraine was “lost”, and that the best response was to annex the frankly pro-Russian areas of the country – in addition to Crimea, the Donbas. In reality, separating the Russian population from the Ukrainian population is like wanting to separate milk and coffee from a cappuccino.

Evidently, Putin’s paranoia increasingly threw Ukraine into the arms of the United States and the European Union.

Ukraine and Russia have thus been at war for eight years, and while it has so far been a low-intensity war, it has left 13,000 dead. The Russians support the Russian separatists who created the independent republics of Luhansk and Donetsk in the east of the country, and which Putin recognized on February 22, 2022.

(Many think that Putin has an obsession for numerology. He attacked Georgia on 8 August 2008, that is, on 8-8-2008. And he attacked Ukraine on 22 February 2022: 22-2-2022. Anyone who believes in the significance of numbers, believes in a destiny.)

The reaction of the Kyiv government towards the separatists is not very different from that of the Madrid government against Catalan or Basque separatists, for example. The difference is that while behind Catalan and Basque separatists there is no one apart from the Catalans and Basques, behind the separatists of Donbas there is Putin.

Since 2014, Russian friends and colleagues who were regularly invited to Ukraine are no longer invited. The reason given is that today a Russian citizen in Ukraine could be put at risk.

Ukrainians with friends and colleagues in Russia have seen their personal relations grow colder over time. But what is shocking is that these Russian friends never talk about politics with them, they never say, "I am sorry for what is happening between Ukraine and Russia!" Politics seems to be a taboo topic for many Russians.

The truth is that these two countries are dramatically distancing themselves from one another, like the galaxies in our expanding universe.

Post-2014 Ukrainian governments are pushing for a systematic cultural "Ukrainization" of the country. Shop lettering, like any public inscription, must all be in Ukrainian. Classes in schools and universities, exams, etc., must be held in the Ukrainian language. The government supports publishing, and theatrical and film productions only in Ukrainian (thus, a book of mine, later published in Russian, was published in Ukrainian thanks to Ukrainian government subsidies). The strategy is to eradicate classic Ukrainian bilingualism with a new bilingualism: to replace Russian with English. It is striking to see both the Ukrainian flag and that of the European Union in front of public buildings, as if Ukraine were already part of the EU. All Russian TV channels are banned, but there are private Ukrainian channels in the Russian language (as there are channels in the minority languages, Polish, Hungarian, Bulgarian and Romanian). There have been no direct flights between Russia and Ukraine for years; if you want to go from Russia to Ukraine or vice versa you usually have to change planes in Minsk, Belarus.

In Ukraine, films produced in Russia are no longer shown. Instead, books printed in Russia can be bought in bookstores. In Ukraine, there is a blacklist of Russian directors, authors and actors who have publicly approved the annexation of Crimea, none of whose works can be seen or read in Ukraine.

The obligation to hold all classes in Ukrainian creates some problems for those who are native Russian speakers, because not all Ukrainian citizens understand Ukrainian perfectly. However, it must be said that Ukrainianization is neither iron-strong nor repressive; in fact, many private institutions use Russian and publish in Russian. The Ukrainian government distinguishes between the Russian language that everyone speaks, and which it protects, from Russia as a state and nation.

Obviously not all Russians or Ukrainians think the same way. Some of my Ukrainian-speaking friends, who have always spoken Ukrainian in their family, are pro-Russian. One of them, a psychoanalyst, wanted to emigrate to Russia.

I have found that one is pro-Russian and especially pro-Putin when one somehow mourns the loss of the USSR. One is Putinist when one is "nostalgic", as was said in Italy of the Fascists after 1945. This is difficult for us to understand, since we do not think of Putin's Russia as a socialist country at all, but rather like a gaz-cracy. But then nostalgia for the USSR is not nostalgia for socialism, but for Soviet *power*. It is the Soviet empire that is admired, not communism. It is clear that Putin would like to re-establish the power of the USSR, albeit in a Russian nationalist version. So, the anti-Putin Russians, when exchanging messages online, call him Putler (Putin + Hitler), because they fear that their correspondence will be monitored through algorithms. Deeply democratic Russian friends speak to me desperately of their feeling spied on and persecuted by the regime. Ukrainian friends do not have these concerns, they do not feel observed by the Power.

I asked my Russian friends who hate Putin why the head of the Kremlin is so popular among the population. They tell me that the political class that emerged after the collapse of the USSR was of a very low intellectual and moral level and you could see it, everyone looked like gangsters. Even Putin looks like a gangster... but *less than the others*. According to them, he appeared to be the only presentable one in the midst of an unbelievable political rabble. Even anti-Putins admit that Putin appeared "the least worst."

In Italy, people think that most politicians are thieves. Russians and Ukrainians thought, at least until a certain time, that their politicians were murderers. A difficult birth, therefore, for democracy.

It must be said, however, that in recent times, positions have been polarizing, even among intellectuals. Most Russian friends and colleagues speak ill of Ukraine to me, and most Ukrainian friends and colleagues speak ill of Russia. Over time, they align themselves with the positions of their respective governments. This is also when they know Western languages and are able to follow the international media. My pro-Putin friends who read English or German tell me that our media give a completely distorted picture of the situation, that we Europeans, in short, take the propaganda of our NATO governments as true facts. They think exactly what we think of them: that they are victims of the regime's lies. Polls say that the vast majority of Russians support Putin and think the current crisis is all the fault of Ukraine and the West.

I would like to meet someone in Western Europe who has sympathy for Putin. I haven't met them yet. I know that there are pro-Putinists, such as Marine Le Pen in France, and Berlusconi and Salvini in Italy: far-right politicians. Today it is the European far right that is nostalgic for the USSR!

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Russians have not forgotten the Ukrainian "betrayal" during World War II. In fact, Ukrainian nationalists, anti-Russian, allied themselves with the Germans and also participated in the persecution of Jews. The figure most detested by Russians is that of Stepan Bandera (1909-1959). He was an ultra-right, anti-Semitic Ukrainian nationalist who fought first the Poles and then the Soviets. When western Ukraine was Polish, Bandera staged a failed assassination attempt on the Polish interior minister in 1934, and remained in prison until 1939. Although he sided with Nazi Germany against the Russians, he was also arrested by the Germans and interned in a concentration camp precisely because he was a nationalist. In 1944, however, he was freed to organize resistance against the Soviet advance to the West. On that occasion, it is said, he was smeared by various crimes. After the war he found refuge in West Germany, until he was killed by KGB agents in Munich in 1959 with a potassium cyanide gun.

In 2010, anti-Russian Ukrainian President Victor Yushenko had the unfortunate idea of proclaiming Bandera a "hero of Ukraine", an act immediately condemned by the European Parliament, Poland, Russia and Israel. Statues in his honor were erected. Opinion oscillated, there was a swing in his favor depending on the Ukrainian government. However, he remains a highly controversial figure. The Russians consider him a war criminal responsible for the deaths of civilians, especially Poles.



Monument to Bandera in L'viv

On the other hand, Ukrainians increasingly detest Russians and their government. Let's say that for Russians, more and more Ukrainians are "fascists", while for Ukrainians more and more Russians are "imperialist Soviets", even though both are in fact neither one nor the other.

I have had time to see the national Ukrainian spirit grow and become stronger over the years. The election of an actor, Zelensky, was the crucial turning point leading to the birth of Ukrainian patriotism. Before that, Ukraine fluctuated between pro-Russian leaders and pro-West leaders, but they were all regarded with suspicion and considered to be corrupt stand-ins for the old Soviet regime, political hacks. Zelensky, who, in a television comedy show, played the role he would later have in reality, has shown not only that nature imitates art, but that Ukraine was only truly born when it found an artist to "invent" it. Beyond being the product of politics, a nation is the product of art.

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Ukraine is virtually divided into an eastern part (where Kyiv lies) and a western part. The western part has as its moral capital, L'viv, which has all the air of a Central European city, especially Austria, and in fact it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The famous Austrian writer Sacher-Masoch, whom the city still celebrates today, was born there.

Today, of course, the Russian and Ukrainian populations are widely mixed, but it is no coincidence that the American embassy recently moved all staff to L'viv: it is assumed that Putin is pointing to Kyiv, not to western Ukraine.

As a foreigner, I do not grasp a real difference between Russia and Ukraine. In both countries I am welcomed beautifully, in both countries there is great attention to Western culture, educated people speak English and other European languages...and if they hate each other today, it appears to me as fraternal hatred.

I notice certain differences, of course. For example, Russians use patronymics in addition to the proper name – for example, Olga Petrovna, Olga daughter of Petrov – Ukrainians do not. It is common for a Russian to invite you to his home or host you, while in Ukraine it is very rare. An invitation to dinner in a Ukrainian house implies a deep level of intimacy, a long friendship.

Food is one area where I prefer Ukraine to Russia. *Borsch*, a soup made from beets, is better in Ukraine, also because it is a Ukrainian national dish. If there is one aspect in which Russia is little Westernized, alas, it is the cuisine. In Moscow you have to go to luxury restaurants to eat well. When Russians from big cities "go out for dinner", they usually go to Uzbek restaurants. Good food, for them, comes from Asia. For me, Uzbek restaurants are delicious, because they exhibit an oriental, comfortable luxury, which had to clash with Soviet dryness and austerity.

For years now, the Russian visa process seems designed to discourage one from going to Russia—it costs at least 100 euros, and you wait 10 days to have it. Going to Ukraine is instead like visiting an EU, or rather Schengen, country; you enter with only your passport, and if you are an EU European, they treat you like a compatriot.

Yet in both countries there remain vestiges of the Soviet past. For example, in some workplaces there is still a plethora of staff (but less and less, since Western productivity prevails more and more). In an old-fashioned Soviet hotel, for example, you see a lot of employees and you don't know what they do. On each floor there is a kind of guardian, who in fact spends the day sitting at a table doing absolutely nothing. In some offices, you realize that a third of the staff would be enough to do the same job. It is the legacy of a

regime of full employment, as the communist was: everyone must have a job, even if it is not needed.

Ukraine is one of the most egalitarian countries in the world. Today, a country's rate of economic equality is calculated by the Gini coefficient. Ukraine's very low Gini coefficient (25) means it is among the most egalitarian countries in the world (together with Slovenia, Belarus, Slovakia, Moldova, and all ex-communist countries). When, data in hand, I tell my Ukrainian friends that their country is the most egalitarian, they don't believe it – proof that people have no perception of the extent of their country's inequalities. It seems incredible, but more than thirty years after the collapse of communism, some important traits of socialism persist: the ex-socialist countries are still among the most egalitarian in the world (like the Scandinavian countries, which also have a very low Gini coefficient)—except for Russia, which with its Gini index of 37.70 is less egalitarian than Italy for example (35.40). (For the uninitiated, the seven most unequal countries in the world are all African, with South Africa being the most unequal country on the planet.)

As for GDP per capita, Russia (\$11,270) is almost three times richer than Ukraine (\$4,380). Italy's per capita wealth, according to IMF data, is in turn three times that of Russia (\$35,585). It is known that a military and political giant like Russia is an economic dwarf; Italy's GDP (1940 trillion dollars) is higher than that of Russia (1578 trillion dollars).

Ukrainian poverty, however, is mainly concentrated in the countryside. In the cities, on the other hand, it is rare to see beggars or homeless people, or scenes of degradation. In hotels frequented by foreigners, prostitution is rampant (as it is in Russia). For years when you were invited to Moscow, they sent you to the Cosmos hotel, located outside the historic center and next to the park that illustrates Soviet space achievements. It was an uncomfortable and chaotic place. I don't know why the Russian authorities concentrated all the foreigners in that ghetto. The prostitutes called you several times a night, if they knew that you were alone without a partner.

It seems that Putin wants to act as a unifier of all Russian minorities in neighboring countries, in the wake of what Hitler did by aiming to annex all countries with German-speaking populations. It is as if today France were to wage war on Belgium to annex Wallonia, on Switzerland to recover the French-speaking cantons, and on Italy to take back the French-speaking Valle d'Aosta. At a time when we are increasingly moving towards multi-ethnic and polyglot states, Putin's hubris appears to be a return to a national-romantic past. But it has a people behind him.

I went to Russia in the 1990s, in the years of the economic collapse (a collapse due, as Joseph Stiglitz well showed, to the slavish application of the modules of the then dominant neoliberal Consensus). Misery was everywhere, people on the street were selling their pins, buttons, a single fork... We Westerners were seen as nabobs. If we were on the street, there was no need to call a taxi, just lift your finger and any car stopped to transport you, and you bargained the price. At the time, anyone who drove a car was a potential taxi driver.

Alcoholism reached very high levels, and life expectancy dropped (dramatically for males, from 67 to 55 years). You have to consider this horrible background to understand why many Russians think that "Putin saved Russia" from destitution.

Yet I must say that I have never perceived any real sense of inferiority among Russians. They said "of course, for now you Westerners are the winners, but we Russians..." Russia is the Third Rome, they might say. Russians have a very high esteem of their culture (especially literary), of their art, of their science, in short, of themselves. They rightly think they speak one of the most important languages in the world. Those who become more westernized do so not to follow us as marginals and students, but to be like us as protagonists.

Ukrainian pride is very different. There are two types of Ukrainians. Some are very patriotic, they detest everything Russian, they aim for a revival of the Ukrainian language and literature, and they feel like champions of democracy. The others are Ukrainians by pure chance, because after the collapse of the USSR

they found themselves on this side of the border, but for them it would also be perfectly fine to be Russian or something else. There is also an important Jewish community, especially in the Odessa region.

Odessa does not look like a Russian city at all, its architecture is quite Mediterranean, although it was founded in 1794 by Tsarina Catherine. Russian, not Ukrainian, is spoken, yet I have never noticed great pro-Russian sympathies. All tourists go to visit the famous staircase that goes to the port, the one immortalized by Eisenstein in *The Battleship Potemkin*.



The Potemkin Staircase, Odessa (built between 1837 and 1841)

As for the Western consulates and cultural institutes in Kyiv, compared to the vital activism of American, British, French, Israeli and German institutions, the Italian ones have so far shone for their absenteeism. Italian institutions in Ukraine for decades seem to have concentrated only on business and economic exchanges. But recently things have changed, and the Italian cultural institute has understood that Italy, in addition to wine and oil, can also export art, philosophy, design, in short, culture .

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I am sometimes asked if there are differences between Italian, Russian and Ukrainian analysts. By definition, the unconscious is never national, it is trans-cultural. It is rather the social life of patients that often appears different from ours.

In the early days I was struck by the fact that most of those who started an analytical training were not graduates in psychology or medicine or psychiatry, as is the case in the West, but rather people, for us, with strange pasts: people coming from the worlds of business, finance, advertising, and the like. I understand that for decades, post-communist regimes said that “it is essential that you dedicate yourself now to business as before you dedicated yourself to being part of the Communist Party”. Millions of Russians in a short time had to recycle themselves as businessmen or businesswomen.

My colleagues then confirmed to me that psychoanalysis does not take off in academic institutions, in universities few psychologists do analytical training. Then I understood why: Russians and Ukrainians understood that psychoanalysis is *a liberal art*, an art reluctant to be controlled by the state. Analytical training involves risky investments (years of analysis, long courses). Psychoanalysis is like art, literature, cinema, the leading computer industries: it was born as a free profession, and it will remain so in the background. Russians and Ukrainians are not fooled by Freudo-Marxist chatter, they know well that psychoanalysis is a “bourgeois” practice, unthinkable without capitalism.

As I mentioned, I believe that Russia experienced, even more than Ukraine, the tremendous shock of the transition from socialism to the capitalist system. The family appears more fragile than in Italy. The transition to the free market system has swept apart an entire generation that for 70 years had been accustomed to a communist lifestyle, so that many have sunk into misery, crime, alcoholism, or all three. Many were drawn into old Russian traditions such as *zapoi*, as described in many Russian novels. The *zapoi* is an almost mystical rite, especially male: it is not simply getting drunk in a group, but rather passing two, three, or four days in a state of constant drunkenness. Many say that in this way they enter a sort of mystical state of consciousness.

The shock was difficult, especially for intellectuals and those who had made a military career and had reached high ranks (the status of the military in the USSR was very high). They suddenly found themselves very poor, and had to reinvent themselves in a gig economy. They had to completely change their lives and especially their values.

It is astonishing that some women in analysis, both Russian and Ukrainian, have had experiences of prostitution in the past. It was a way to survive. And many are those who have had relatives or friends involved in crime.

In general, the generation that today is 30 to 40 years old – especially the female one – reacted to the puritanical morality that prevailed in the USSR with a sexual freedom that amazed even us Westerners, who also passed through the 1960s. In fact, the typically Soviet sexophobic education was not very different from the Catholic education that my generation received (I am a baby boomer of 1948), only that their “60s” had them starting from the 90s. Until a few years ago both in Ukraine and in Russia the cities were crowded with girls with dizzying miniskirts, striptease and erotic shows were also seen on TV. Certain restaurants in Moscow had gambling dens. I have the impression, however, that this explosive phase has passed.

As for the Ukrainians, they are absolutely convinced that their women are the most beautiful in the world.

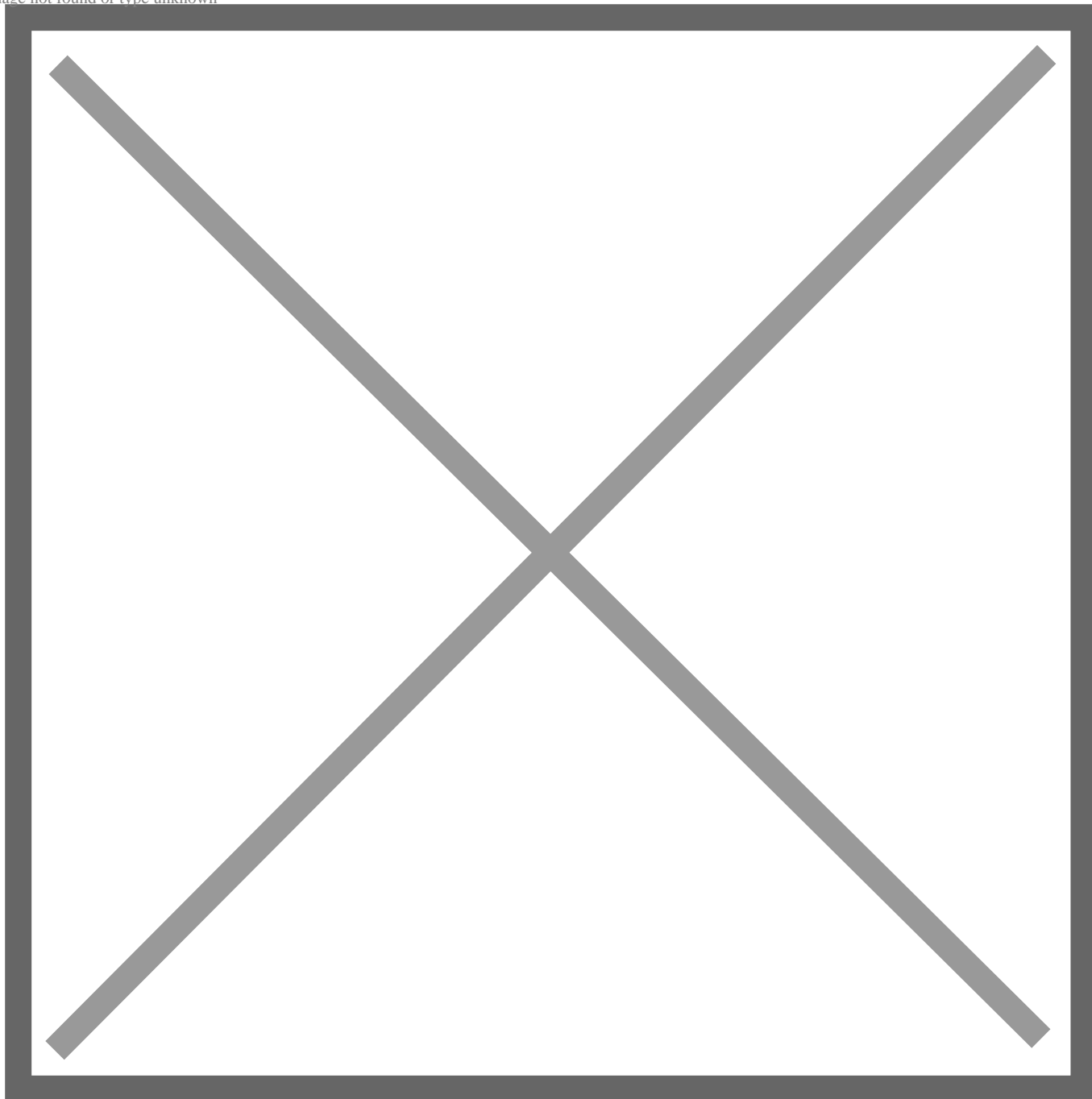
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Many might think that a war between two countries that, even physically, resemble each other like drops of water is absurd. But we psychoanalysts know very well that real differences between people are never “real” differences, but the product of differences between signifiers. And signifiers are often political artefacts.

And last but not least, there is **no fundamental economic reason that opposes Russia to Western Europe**, including Ukraine. In fact, almost half of the gas consumed in Europe comes from Russia. If economic reason were to rule the affairs of the world, the EU and Russia would have to be closely allied countries. But peoples are also moved by other unreasonable reasons.

February 22-23, 2022

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Kiev, morning 25 February 2022