

# Ukraine's Bittersweet Independence Day

The country broke free from the Soviet Union a quarter-century ago. But its struggle for self-determination still smolders.



Servicemen march in Ukraine's independence day military parade.

Valentyn Ogirenko / Reuters

**LINDA KINSTLER**

**AUG 24, 2016 | GLOBAL**

---

Like *The Atlantic*? Subscribe to [The Atlantic Daily](#), our free weekday email newsletter.

SIGN UP

---

On any given night in Kiev, you can pass the time in one of the city's popular new watering holes, descend into the basement of the old cinema to enter a Brooklyn-style speakeasy, or sip a \$10 cocktail on the rooftop of a trendy music hall, where every piece of furniture in the bar appears to be up for sale. There's an imitation [Nobu](#), and a smattering of restaurants with names like "Reef" and "Simple" that cater to the international moneyed class. At these establishments, you'll overhear

patrons speaking in fluent English—usually Americans or Brits, likely part of the small army of Western consultants and grant-makers that have descended upon Ukraine since 2014's Maidan Revolution and the subsequent Russian invasion.

As these European spaces have sprung up, Ukraine's old Russian place names have begun to disappear, swept away by the surge of nationalism that accompanied the events of 2014, which also paved the way for a concerted [decommunization campaign](#) to rid the nation of its Soviet trappings. Twenty-eight towns and 800 villages are being [renamed](#), not to mention countless streets and squares; once again, after centuries of being shunted between powers, ideologies, and languages, Ukraine's political and lexicographical makeup is under revision.

2016 is a year of anniversaries for Ukraine, not all joyous: April marked the 30 years since the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, and September marks the [75th anniversary](#) of the Nazi [massacre at Babi Yar](#). It has been two years since Russia launched its surreptitious invasion of Eastern Ukraine. It is also the 25th anniversary of the [failed Soviet coup](#) of August 1991, an event that precipitated independence movements in Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and the Baltics, but passed [without much ceremony](#) in Moscow last week.

Wednesday also marked the 25th anniversary of Ukraine's declaration of independence from the Soviet Union, when the country's border with Russia became an international boundary. Last year's independence day festivities were marred by bloody clashes between Ukrainian and separatist forces in the east. A recent uptick in fighting has stoked [fears](#) that the same will be true of this year's commemoration, especially after the Kremlin [announced](#) a new round of war games in the Black Sea earlier this month. "We have to walk through the 25th year of independence as if we are on thin ice. We should understand: The slightest misstep can be fatal," Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko [warned](#) on this date last year. This week alone, [at least nine](#) people are said to have been killed in fighting. On its hard-won independence day, Ukraine finds its self-determination under attack.

Two years of war have revised its national borders and narrative, and Russia's expansionist project threatens to further fracture an already divided land. A quarter-century of independence has not enabled Ukraine to fully escape Russian control. So Ukrainians could be forgiven for wondering how, exactly, to celebrate this bittersweet day.

---

## **Ukraine's war for independence has been smoldering, in one form or another, for most of its history.**

---

In an address in Kiev on Wednesday, Poroshenko attempted to provide an answer. A military parade down the city's central boulevard displayed the Ukrainian army's might, "created almost from scratch," since 2014, he [said](#). "This is a signal to the enemy: The Ukrainians are ready to seriously continue to fight for their independence."

That fight has been smoldering, in one form or another, for most of Ukraine's history. The nation was on "thin ice" long before Russia's imperial project threw the region's borders into "constant flux," as Ukrainian historian Serhiy Bilenky writes in his history of nationalism in Eastern Europe. This was a period when Ukrainian writers had begun formulating an idea of their nation as a distinct entity, one that shared a historical and linguistic connection with its neighbors but was markedly distinct. "The mental maps of Ukrainians in the 1830s-1840s did not necessarily reject Russian visions of both Russia and Ukraine. Ukrainian and Russian geographies were to a large extent compatible," Bilenky [writes](#). "The Ukrainian gaze, however, emphasized an ethnically split empire rather than a national space dominated by Great Russians."

It was this "Ukrainian gaze" upon European geography that, in 1862, inspired the Ukrainian poet Pavlo Chubynsky to write "[Ukraine has not yet died](#)," the song that would become the country's national anthem. Like the borders of the nation it honors, the anthem has been periodically revised. The original version includes a verse lamenting Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky's unification of "Little Russia" and

“Great Russia” in 1654, after he successfully won Kiev back from the Poles to found the Cossack Hetmanate, earning the **moniker** “Protector of the Cossacks”:

Oh **Bohdan**, Bohdan  
Our great **hetman**  
What for did you give Ukraine  
To wretched muscovites?!  
To return her honor,  
We lay our heads  
We shall call ourselves Ukraine's  
Faithful sons!

For Ukrainian patriots, the song mourned an ancient national sovereignty subsumed by Moscow. After being banned for some 70 years by the Soviet Union, a revised version of the anthem appeared in 1991, the line about “wretched Muscovites” expunged.

In 2003, the Ukrainian parliament approved the official lyrics, and Chubynsky’s original anthem was further abbreviated. Though unofficial performances often include some of his lyrics, in the official anthem only the first verse and chorus of his **original composition** remain:

Ukraine’s glory has not yet died, nor her freedom,  
Upon us, compatriots, fate shall smile once more.  
Our enemies will vanish, like dew in the morning sun,  
And we too shall rule, brothers, in a free land of our own.

In this finalized version of the anthem, the call to bloody battle was erased to make the song more palatable to allies in both the east and the west. It seemed to

encapsulate a national identity on the verge of being defined not so much in opposition to Moscow, but rather by the challenges of democracy.

The following year, Ukrainians took to the streets in the Orange Revolution, which was sparked by fraudulent results in a presidential run-off election. In that uprising and in the Maidan Revolution a decade later, the national anthem emerged as a battle cry for protesters piling into Kiev's main square. "Souls and bodies we'll lay down, all for our freedom, / And we will show that we, brothers, are of the Cossack nation!" Ukrainian performers and protesters chanted. According to historian Charles King, the word "Cossack" likely comes from the Turkic word "Kazak," which means "free man." The lasting image of Ukraine as a "Cossack nation" seemed aimed at preserving a triumphant national narrative of a free Ukraine.

---

## **The "Ukrainian gaze" is turned steadfastly toward Europe.**

---

In some ways, Ukrainians now enjoy more freedom than ever. They have been promised continued military aid from the United States and, eventually, [visa-free travel to the European Union](#). With Western support, the country has been able, thus far, to avoid complete financial collapse. The "Ukrainian gaze" in much of the country is turned steadfastly toward Europe.

Even as Poroshenko's ruling party consolidates power and increasingly comes to resemble the government its supporters fought to displace, optimism in the European project persists. "Ukraine should have done more for the U.K.," one friend in Kiev told me the week after the Brexit vote, lamenting the British vote to leave the union. If only Brits understood what Europe means to Ukrainians like him, and how hard they fought for it, maybe they would have voted differently, he thought. EU flags fly aspirationally outside government buildings in the capital.

On the other hand, there are thousands of displaced, impoverished, injured, and ill Ukrainians suffering from the depleted currency, dearth of goods, and blockades preventing medical supplies from reaching occupied territories in the east of the country. The city's speakeasies and high-end restaurants are places "for people who

seem to live in another country,” and probably do, as Sergiy Solodkyy, first deputy director of Ukraine’s [Institute of World Policy](#), put it. Ukrainians whose savings evaporated overnight walk past these (often half-empty) businesses with understandable frustration at their country’s slow pace of reforms and a sense that the EU, preoccupied with other problems, has abandoned them. It can be difficult for Ukrainians to understand why the EU isn’t doing more in their nation.

“It’s like forcing hungry people to understand people who just went to a fancy restaurant and ordered all the most expensive items,” Solodkyy told me. “France was reluctant to implement sanctions [toward Russia] because it would hurt its pig industry, [and] meanwhile here 10,000 people died.”

Cynicism abounds. In his independence day speech, Poroshenko invoked Chubynsky’s original warning about “wretched Muscovites.” Russia, he said, “would do well to remember the “wise counsel of the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky,” who, in his poem “[Debt of Ukraine](#),” warned “Comrade Moskal”—a derogatory name for Muscovites—“don’t make fun of Ukraine.” Poroshenko looked backward for strength, declaring that “although we celebrate only the 25th anniversary of our independence, in fact, we are far older.” The contradictions of this long history are still visible. Ukraine’s gaze may be fixed on Europe, with its increasingly closed borders, but it is also locked in battle with Russia. It cannot look both ways at once.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

---

**LINDA KINSTLER** is a contributing writer for *Politico Europe*.

---

