

THE RUSSIAN - UKRAINIAN WAR AND THE STRENGTHENING OF IRREDENTIST NARRATIVE IN THE CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES AT THE BEGINNING OF THE XXI CENTURY

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Abstract

This article will analyze the reasons for the intensification of irredentist rhetoric in Central and Easter Europe, including those caused by the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Through the prism of different approaches, the essence of irredentism is revealed, and its transformation is shown depending on changes in the system of international relations, from the idea of national unification to an instrument of expansion. At the present stage, irredentism is expansionist in nature, due to the implementation of the Russian Federation's aggressive policy towards Ukraine. The authors analyze the ideological justification of the irredentist policy of the Russian Federation, which is carried out, among other things, under such irredentist slogans as "one nation", "protection of compatriots", "restoration of historical justice". The indecision and inconsistency of international organizations in condemning the actions of the aggressor state, in particular, the occupation of Crimea in 2014, contribute to the intensification of irredentist rhetoric in Central and Eastern Europe. The article analyzes the statements of Romanian and Hungarian politicians, which show the presence of irredentist slogans regarding the territory of Ukraine. The irredentist component is contained in the programs of the right-wing radical political parties Greater Romania, Fidesz, and Jobbik (For a Better Hungary). Several explanations are given for the reasons for the

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actualization of irredentist rhetoric, which, despite international law norms regarding the inviolability of state borders, persists in political discourse. Among the reasons identified are the popularity of the idea of a “Great State” and the strengthening of populism against the backdrop of the identity crisis in Central and Eastern Europe, which is driven by fears of losing sovereignty and traditional values in the context of European integration processes. Finally, the authors emphasize the weak reaction of the world to the aggressive policy of the Russian Federation as a significant contributing factor.

Keywords: *irredentism, irredentist narrative, Central and Eastern Europe, Russian-Ukrainian war, populism.*

1. Introduction

The history of irredentism dates back to the 19th century, when the process of uniting the Italian principalities into one state raised the question of “terre irredente” – unliberated lands, which, it was believed, should be included in the composition of the Italian state. Since then, irredentism has undergone an evolution, which was driven by changes in the system of international relations: from unification in the 19th century to expansionism at the beginning of the 21st century. The implementation of an aggressive policy by the Russian Federation at the beginning of the 21st century brought the question of the influence of the irredentist factor on international political relations to the fore. The revival of expansionist irredentism was nonsense *per se*, because it proved a gross disregard for the norms of international law regarding the territorial integrity of Ukraine as a sovereign state and the inviolability of its borders, that is, the levelling of all international legal norms and treaties established in the 20th century. Against this background, irredentist narratives on the part of right-wing radical circles in other European countries intensified. The analysis of the reasons for the activation of irredentist politics has an important scientific, theoretical and practical significance for understanding the trends of its evolution in the conditions of the crisis of the post-bipolar system of international relations and the possibility of forecasting its further development.

The aim of the study is to analyze the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on the intensification of irredentist rhetoric in the states of Central and Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 21st century. To achieve this objective, the following research tasks have been identified: to provide a theoretical conceptualization of irredentism, based on the analysis of scholarly literature and the interpretation of irredentist practices; to investigate the transformation of irredentism within the context of evolving international relations systems and, consequently, to identify specific types (models) of irredentism; to examine the ideological justification behind the Russian Federation's irredentist

policy as a manifestation of expansionist irredentism; to elucidate the complex set of factors contributing to the intensification of irredentist rhetoric in Central and Eastern European countries under contemporary conditions.

The research hypothesis posits that the Russian-Ukrainian war and the weak response of the international community to the Russian Federation's expansionism served as significant catalysts for the strengthening of irredentist rhetoric in Central and Eastern Europe, but they were not the sole determining factors. The authors assume that the activation of irredentist themes on the political agenda of Central and Eastern European countries was also significantly influenced by domestic political phenomena and processes unfolding within the context of European integration. In particular, this refers to the identity crisis, which has driven the growing popularity of the "Great State" idea in public discourse as a compensatory mechanism for preserving national identity, as well as the activity of right-wing radical parties that utilize populist slogans and appeal to traditional values to mobilize electoral support.

2. Materials and methods

The empirical basis of the study comprises regulatory acts and official documents of international organizations, notably the United Nations and NATO, political party programs, and statistical data from the All-Ukrainian Population Census.

The methodological framework is constructed through a synthesis of systemic, rational, and conflict-based approaches, which facilitates a comprehensive exploration of the research subject. The systemic approach enables the interpretation of irredentism as a complex interaction system within a defined triad: "national minority/irredenta – kin (irredentist) state – host (polyethnic) state". Through the lens of the rational approach, irredentist rhetoric is analyzed as an instrumental tool employed by political actors to achieve pragmatic objectives, including electoral mobilization, the enhancement of political status, and the legitimization of power ambitions. The application of a conflict-based approach is necessitated by the specific nature of the research object within the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. This approach allows for the analysis of irredentism as a primary source of regional security destabilization and a factor exacerbating interstate contradictions amidst the current crisis of the international relations system.

To address specific research objectives, a set of specialized methods was employed. The comparative method and modeling were utilized to identify typical models of irredentist policy. The integration of historical and logical methods permitted an investigation into the genesis and transformation of irredentism throughout the evolution of international relations system. This methodological synthesis ensures the examination of the research subject both in statics (models of irredentist policy) and in dynamics (historical development).

Furthermore, the research toolkit includes general logical methods such

as analysis and synthesis, generalization, and abstraction, ensuring the validity of the theoretical findings. The conceptual framework unifying these methods is the assertion regarding the decisive role of the "Great State" idea in shaping and justifying modern irredentist policy.

3. Irredentism as a category of scientific analysis

Research interest in irredentism increased in the second half of the 20th century, due to active state-building processes in various regions of the world, the beginning of decolonization, democratic transformations, and especially the collapse of the countries of the socialist camp in Eastern Europe in the 1990s, when the problem of the separation of nations became acute. D. Conversi (2000) notes that the study of separation really began to grow after the collapse of the former communist states, "creating a real industry". Specific manifestations of irredentist movements in the modern world have differences that do not always fit into already known schemes, which force scientists to study each case of irredentism in detail, paying attention to its root causes and unique features.

To date, there is no single conventional definition of the concept of irredentism that would satisfy the entire scientific community. N. Chazan believes that, although irredentism is conceptually different from ethnicity, separatism, pan-cultural movements and border clashes, in fact it acts as an active mixture of all these ingredients, and it is the consideration of this multifaceted approach that characterizes the phenomenon in the best way (Chazan, 1991, p. 141). In addition, there are many other forms of ethnopolitical behaviour that have some features in common with irredentism, which inclines scholars to identify them, for example, irredentism and unionism, irredentism and pan-movements. J.C. Fuzesi (2006) notes that the lack of a convention means that most cases of irredentism are not labelled and analysed as such, for example, German reunification, the Irish republican movement, and Somalia's protracted conflicts with neighbouring countries are labelled simply as post-colonial wars, albeit in neighbouring countries and many ethnic relatives of Somalis live there. Instead, the author notes, Zionism is mistakenly called a "classic case of irredentism", even though it mainly concerns diaspora groups.

Irredentism is defined as a kind of ethno-political movement, characteristic of the so-called "divided peoples", whose territory of compact residence is divided by state or administrative borders. The purpose of this movement is to "gather" the parts of the divided people and the territories of their residence within the borders of one state. D. Horowitz defines irredentism as an attempt to separate the territory or population of one state with the aim of joining another, and as an attempt to separate the territory or population divided between more than one state, with the aim of further uniting them into a single newly formed state (Horowitz, 1991, p. 10). According to D. Conversi, irredentism is a phenomenon that emphasizes the territorial reunification of ethnic relatives in one homeland (Conversi, 2000, p. 334). G. Kim defines

irredentism as political attempts to unify ethnically related parts, that is, the population living in two or more different neighbouring states (Kim, 2016, pp. 89, 90).

The unification of separated ethnic groups is possible due to the purposeful policy of the irredentist state, which is why irredentism is defined as the political course and direction of the state's foreign policy, as any territorial claims made by one sovereign state to another (Mayall, 1990, p. 57; Heubaum, 2009, p. 79; Kornprobst, 2008, p. 9; Chazan, 1991, p. 140). Close to this is the definition of H. Ben-Israel (1991, p. 33), who considers irredentism as a manifestation of expansionism, which is based on atavistic feelings towards the territory and towards relatives and friends. In his opinion, this is an eternal phenomenon, because even before the emergence of nationalist ideologies, many states justified expansionist policies, using the argument of returning territories or liberating their brothers. Very often, these intentions are masked by the desire to protect ethnically or culturally related groups (Landau, 1991; Tranca, 2006, p. 508).

It should be noted that attempts to define irredentism by absolutizing only one side of it are inappropriate, because irredentism acts as an umbrella term that is quite ambiguous. Definitions that seek to cover all its aspects and take into account both the historical and ethnic factors are more accurate. For example, "irredentism is a nationalist belief that the territory being part of another country should be returned for ethnic or historical reasons" (Zaragoza, Ochoa, Medina&Espinoza, 2015).

Irredentist policy possesses a robust ideological underpinning. J. Nagle (2025) investigates the ideological basis of irredentist movements and delineates three key frames employed by segments of the kin-state to legitimize their assertions of proprietary rights over a specific territory and its populace ("proprietary claims"). These frames are identified as: Myth of Ancient Statehood, Sacred Lands and Causes, and The National Family. J. Nagle posits that the mere presence of irredentist frames does not necessarily culminate in the implementation of irredentist policy; rather, irredentist elites can deploy exclusivist ethnonationalist versions of history to legitimate their own domestic interests (Nagle, 2025, p. 9).

There are several varieties of irredentism. According to the status of the participants of the movement, the following types of irredentism are distinguished: 1) one part of the divided nation has already created its own state, while the other/others live compactly on the adjacent territory of the neighbouring state. For example, D. Yagcioglu (1996) connects irredentism with the fact of tense relations between the national minority in the state, on the one hand, and the dominant ethno-cultural group, on the other. This situation leads to the intervention of another neighbouring state, which seeks not only to protect the rights and interests of minorities, but also tries to openly annex the territory of another state; 2) no parts of the divided nation have their own states. S. Saideman and W. Ayres (2000, p. 1127) believe that the desire of several "stateless" related ethnic groups to unite for the purpose of forming a new state is also irredentist and call this phenomenon the "Kurdish style of irredentism";

3) two parts of the nation have their own states (Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic, which united in 1990).

In order to systematize ideas about irredentism according to the “status of unification members” criterion, we offer a table:

Table 1. Status of unification members

Status of unification members	Examples
The irredentist state and related minorities	The unification of Italy and Germany in the second half of the 19th century, the implementation of the Greek “Megali Idea” at the beginning of the 20th century
Several related minorities deprived of their own statehood (“Kurdish style of irredentism”)	Unification aspirations of the Kurds of Syria, Turkey, and Iran
Two states	The reunification of Germany at the end of the 20th century

Source: developed by the authors, 2025

N. Chazan described three types of irredentism, each of which has its own subjects and initiators: 1) the initiator is an ethnic group that seeks to join the state where the ethnically related group is the majority; 2) the initiator is a state that seeks to annex a part of the territory of a neighbouring state where an ethnically related group lives; 3) initiators – several ethnic groups, which are minorities in two or more countries, try to become the majority in some territory (Chazan, 1991, p. 140).

When summarizing the mentioned approaches, we can conclude that the representatives of different scientific schools are united in that the term irredentism reveals the movement, ideology, and strategy of ethnic groups of a divided nation, which are aimed at their reunification within the borders of one state. Modern political science continues both the theoretical conceptualization of irredentism and the analysis of its individual cases in different regions.

4. Transformation of irredentism in the context of changes in international relations systems

Irredentism changed according to the transformation of ideas about the principles of nation-building and state-building and the power balance in the world political arena. This issue is addressed by T. Ambrosio (2001), offering a structural explanation of irredentism, which takes into account the influence of the international or regional context, and which depends on whether the irredentist project will arise and how it will develop.

The question that has to be answered is why did irredentism arise no earlier than in the 19th century? This is explained by the fact that in the 19th century there were great social and worldview changes caused by the American and French revolutions. It is during this period that national liberation

movements are activated and new national states emerge, which try to realize national interests, focusing on the principle of “one state – one nation”. One can see why the 19th century is called the golden age of nationalism.

During a long historical period, the state-centric Westphalian system of international relations, formed in 1648, was designed to protect state interests. The core of the Westphalian system was the idea of state sovereignty, which provided for the supremacy of state power over the entire territory and established the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. However, each state actively pursued an aggressive policy in order to realize its interests.

After the Napoleonic Wars, in 1815, the Vienna system of international relations, or the Concert of Europe, appeared. At the Congress of Vienna, the leading European states consolidated the territorial and political status quo in the region, including making the decision to engage in diplomatic consultations on territorial or other issues. In fact, the era of the domination of empires had come, but at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, a crisis of imperial influence can already be observed. E. Gellner associated the period 1815-1918 with such a stage of the formation of national states as “nationalist irredentism”, which is characterized by the emergence of the nationalist idea as a political principle. At this stage, the formula “one culture – one state” is implemented (Gellner, 1998). The goal of national irredentism was the coincidence of cultural and linguistic boundaries with political ones. It was during this period that the unification of Germany and Italy took place. These are textbook examples of the implementation of the irredentist policy, but irredentism was also formed in other nations of Europe. In all national states born between the 19th and 20th centuries, political movements developed that fought to annex other territories located near their borders. This necessity was justified by the linguistic or ethnic similarity between the inhabitants of the nation-state and the desired territories, or by historical reasons (Pitassio, 2015).

International relations became complicated during the imperialist era at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, when the world was divided. However, at this stage in achieving irredentist goals, the states were limited by the interests of partners in a political coalition, as, for example, Italy at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries changed its territorial claims and first took into account the position of its partners in the Tripartite Alliance, then in the Entente. After the First World War, the interwar Versailles-Washington system emerged as a result of the signing of the Versailles Peace Treaty in 1919 and the agreements of the Washington Conference of 1921-1922. Its feature took into account the interests of the victorious states and neglected the interests of other states, including those that emerged on the ruins of empires. It is with the interwar system that the next stage in the formation of national states is connected, which E. Gellner called the triumph and defeat of national irredentism (Gellner, 1998). Multinational empires are disintegrating, a number of smaller states are emerging, each of which implements its own project of nation building. The defeat of national irredentism is connected with the emergence of the problem of national minorities in new political units,

which now sought protection from the mother state.

A demonstrative example of the triumph and defeat of irredentism can be the situation with the Hungarian ethnic group, which in 1920, according to the Treaty of Trianon, was divided, because more than two-thirds of Hungarians ended up outside the borders of Hungary, as part of other states. The duality of the situation is that, on the one hand, an independent state was formed, and on the other hand, the Hungarians received the so-called "Trianon trauma". Hence the increased interest in the life of related groups abroad.

At this time, irredentist sentiments are intensifying in other European countries with irredentism being seen as a means of completing the formation of a national state. It was during the existence of the Versailles-Washington system that the origins of a large number of modern irredentist conflicts were formed, because the very fact of the formation of new states in the multi-ethnic old Europe exacerbated the problem of divided nations and formed many territorial claims between states. In addition, the declared intentions to solve the issue of ethnic division actually served as a cover for plans for territorial gains, and therefore it can be argued that in this way irredentism legitimized territorial claims in Europe. In this context, the action of Lord G. Rothermere regarding the revision of the Treaty of Trianon should be mentioned. In 1926-1928, he led a campaign that helped support Hungary's revanchist plans in Europe. The so-called "Rothermere Action" was aimed at comprehensively supporting the territorial claims of this state regarding Transcarpathia and was condemned by the vast majority of Ukrainian political figures and parties of Transcarpathia (Hyria, 2010, p. 18).

World War II testified to the crisis of the Versailles-Washington system. The leaders of the victorious states signed treaties, starting the Yalta-Potsdam system of international relations. For several decades, a bipolar system of the world order was established, which broke down with the collapse of the USSR. The second half of the 20th century was characterized by unstable international relations. Many international conflicts during this period had a distinct irredentist component, and the foundation of many territorial disputes was laid by the decisions of the victorious states. Despite this fact, open irredentist confrontations were avoided in the second half of the 20th century. It is necessary to take into account the specifics of socialist countries, in which interstate territorial disputes had a latent nature. Since ideological unity was declared more important than ethnic unity, the countries' belonging to one camp (socialist) somewhat obscured the very problem of divided nations. (Horlo, 2017, p. 190).

In general, compared to the period of the end of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries, the number of irredentist conflicts decreased. M. Kornprobst (2008) believes that European states resolved their differences through peaceful recognition of the territorial *status quo* since the end of the Second World War. He came to this conclusion based on an analysis of German and Irish cases of irredentism.

During the second half of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries, the UN and its institutions, primarily the Security Council and the

International Court of Justice, acted as an important arbiter in resolving interstate conflicts. During this period, international legal documents were formed to consolidate the basic principles of modern world politics, including the principle of territorial integrity of states, the principle of non-interference in the affairs of sovereign states, and the right of peoples to self-determination. The UN Charter (1945), the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (1960), the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe Final Act (Helsinki Final Act, 1975) and other documents are the basis that regulates modern international relations. Though the principles of territorial integrity of states and self-determination of peoples are still considered inconsistent. States defending their sovereignty appeal to the principle of the inviolability of state borders, while separatists refer to the right of peoples/nations to self-determination, interpreting it in their favour. By its essence, the principle of territorial integrity of the state should make any territorial claims and disputes impossible, but that is no longer an absolute imperative.

The issue of irredentism reached a new stage at the end of the 20th century, when the countries of the socialist camp suffered an ideological defeat in the “Cold War”. It was then that multinational states collapsed and many new political units appeared. Since the beginning of the 1990s, we can talk about the existence of a new system, a post-bipolar or “post-Cold War” system. This period is characterized by a gradual transition to a post-bipolar, polycentric world.

The post-bipolar world is witnessing a kind of renaissance of nationalism and irredentism. At the end of the 20th century, there was a revival of nationalism instead of the expected decline of national states. There is a “related series” of modern forms of nationalism: “nationalizing” – nationalism of titular nations of new or reformed states; cross-border, conducted by a foreign national homeland; and nationalism of national minorities (Brubaker, 1996, pp. 4, 5). These nationalisms interact and conflict, causing intrastate and interstate conflicts.

In the newly formed states, the problem of national minorities intensified, which forced these states to solve a large set of problems, including satisfying the interests of minorities and preventing the emergence of separatist attitudes, establishing partnership relations with neighbouring states that are related to national minorities. Nevertheless, history shows that conflicts and wars with an irredentist component could not be avoided, especially in the countries that emerged after the breakup of Yugoslavia, where several big ideas collided, in particular, political projects for the revival of “Greater Serbia” and “Greater Croatia”. Periodically, long-term irredentist conflicts in different parts of the world entered the active stage, such as, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

At the beginning of the 21st century, irredentism does not disappear from the agenda. As M. Diriba (2021) emphasizes, irredentism reflects the tangled consequences of nationalism, geopolitics, interstate war, state sovereignty, and territorial integrity, all of which are crucial in setting and promoting agendas for the global political spectrum. Even if territorial claims

are not put forward by states at the official level, they are often present in the programs of radical political parties that call for the revival of the “Great Power”, seeing it within the boundaries that this state entity had at the time of its greatest power. This could potentially strain interstate relations, as the slogan of “protecting compatriots abroad” is not neutral and has dangerous potential, as demonstrated by Russian irredentism.

The issue of resolving irredentist disputes in the context of European integration processes deserves special attention. On the one hand, the creation of a single European space supposedly alleviates the acuteness of the separation problem. On the other hand, one should not forget that ethnic identity always remains important for an individual, and in the conditions of large-scale processes such as regional integration or globalization, it also acts as a guarantee of preserving identity. Therefore, it can become an important resource for the political mobilization of individuals to support nationalist projects. However, in our opinion, the European security system itself stands guard over the territorial integrity of states. EU and NATO member states, in accordance with the norms of these organizations, must refrain from any territorial claims.

The peculiarities of irredentism during the existence of various systems of international relations are depicted in the table:

Table 2. International system – Type of irredentism

International system	Type of irredentism	Examples
Vienna	Unifying	Greece, Italy, Germany
Versailles-Washington	Expansionist	Germany
Yalta-Potsdam	Latent	Countries of Europe, Asia
Post-bipolar	Moderate	Hungary, Romania, Serbia
	Revival of expansionist irredentism	Russian Federation

Source: developed by the authors, 2025

Taking into account the radicalization of nationalist sentiments in European countries and given the signs of a crisis in the international security system, it is quite possible that territorial disputes will move from a latent to an open stage and new irredentist conflicts will occur. In order to limit Russian irredentism from becoming a precedent, the world's leading states and international organizations need to develop a joint, unambiguous position in assessing irredentism and improve the means of resisting aggressive expansionist policies.

5. Ideological substantiation of the irredentist policy of the Russian Federation

The Russian Federation demonstrated the revival of expansionist irredentism, accompanying its policy with an eclectic mix of goals and slogans, among which are “the special civilizational mission of the Russian people in the confrontation with Western influence” and the great-power narrative of the revival of the empire as the “Third Rome”, and also “the return of historical lands” and the mythical idea of “one nation”. Aggressive politics with an irredentist component was formed over a relatively long period, starting from the 1990s. According to C. Alexander (Alexander, 2020), after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was a centre of irredentism. In the years immediately before and after 1991, Moscow began seizing and occupying territory again – this time in the form of enclaves within several non-Russian Soviet republics that became independent states in the early 1990s. This refers to the support of separatist forces in Georgia (Abkhazia, South Ossetia) and Moldova (Transnistria). At that time, the world community's reaction to Russia's aggressive actions, including in Georgia in 2008, was not decisive enough. And the weak international response in Syria in 2011 convinced Putin that his hands were free (Alexander, 2020, p. 5). The occupation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 did not provoke decisive action on the part of the international community, which led to the escalation of the war in the form of full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022.

At the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014, the Revolution of Dignity took place in Ukraine, which led to the fall of the cronyism regime of V. Yanukovych. The revolution became an important step in the formation of civil society in Ukraine and contributed to the strengthening of collective solidarity. However, the separatist movements in Crimea and Donbas, which developed according to the Russian scenario, immediately intensified. For a long time, these regions were in the field of view of Russian politicians, as they were considered as parts of the “Russian world”, which, as a result of “historical injustice”, became parts of Ukraine. As a result of the Russian information influence on the population of these regions, their residents gradually formed a desire for “reunification with the historical homeland”. As for the representation of groups of divided people in Ukraine, the numerical predominance of Russians can be said only in relation to Crimea, although here the share of Russians among all residents of the republic decreased from 65.6% in 1989 to 58.3% in 2001 (Pro kilkist ta sklad naselennia Ukrayny, 2001), and in Donbas, the share of Russians in the ethnic composition of the region's population amounted to 38.1% in 2001 (Skliar, 2005).

At this point, the higher state leadership of the Russian Federation used the difficult political situation in Ukraine to prepare for the annexation of Crimea. With the support of the Russian authorities and under the control of the Russian military, on March 16, 2014, a so-called “referendum” was held in Crimea on the status of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, which resulted in the illegal incorporation of this region into Russia. At the meetings of the State Duma of the Russian Federation, where the results of the Crimean

“referendum” were considered, the deputies expressed admiration for the annexation of Crimea, using vivid irredentist vocabulary, such as “reunification of a divided people”, “historical justice restored” or “we do not betray our own” (Stenogramma zasedaniya, 2014). At the same time, separatists in Donbas became more active, which led to the formation of terrorist organizations “DPR” and “LPR”, which for a long time received significant support in terms of military power and weapons from the Russian authorities. Yet if in the Crimean variant of separatism the irredentist goal was obvious, then for the Donbas separatists it was rather vague at first.

In February 2022, with the support of the Russian Federation, the so-called “independence” of the DPR and LPR was declared. On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of the territory of Ukraine and occupied part of its territory. In September 2023, a “pseudo-referendum” was held in the temporarily occupied territories, as a result of which the Russian Federation announced the “inclusion” of “new regions” into its composition. The UN strongly condemned the actions of the Russian Federation.

The irredentist component is an integral part of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation, strangely combined with other appeals. In Russia, over the past two decades, nationalist sentiments have grown significantly, as nationalism has practically become a state ideology. Nationalist notes appear even in the programs of political parties of a liberal (at least in name) direction. For example, the Practical Program of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (2011) states that “Russians are the most numerous divided nation. What is needed now is the ideology of returning Russia to its historical territories, to which the Russian people have a historical and moral right”. In fact, this is a reflection of the concept of “Russian world” as fundamental to Russia's foreign policy. In its essence, the concept of “Russian world” is a neo-imperial idea, as it has distinct signs of assembling an empire. O. Shevchenko (2014, p. 67) calls the regime existing in Russia a typical fundamentalist project, which has the following characteristics: rejection of the liberal values of material well-being and democracy as a political analogue of this value, consistent anti-Westernism, the great role of religion in the ideological basis of Russian fundamentalism, military ideology, deep psychopathological features, lack of rational components, because the project “cannot be understood as a rational ‘protection of interests’ and therefore, by and large, it has not so much a geopolitical as a mystical nature”.

Russia's foreign policy, which is based on the idea of “Russian peace”, has acquired an imperial character and is actually aimed at reconstructing the image of a powerful state, which was the Russian Empire, and later the USSR. The Great Power idea can be formed in those societies that are nostalgic for the era of the greatest prosperity, and become the basis of the policy of irredentism. While the idea of the “Great Power” are shared by many European nations, it is another matter that, at this stage, they are only projects reflected in the programs of radical parties, although they find favour with a part of the population. In Russia, this idea motivates an aggressive foreign policy in relation to Ukrainian territories, but it is veiled by intentions to protect

compatriots abroad.

This poses the question of what is more important in the irredentist policy of the Russian Federation: ethnic or territorial factor? Considering the way the Russian Federation destroys Ukrainian cities and villages, destroying everything living there, and also organizes the genocide of the Ukrainian people in the occupied territories, the territorial factor certainly dominates. M. Toft in his work "Territory and War" (2014) holds the idea that the territory was and will remain the main problem in explaining the beginning and escalation of the war, and it is the characteristics of the territory that affect how the conflict develops and ends, as well as the nature of the future peace. L. Freedman (2014) believes that unlimited ambitions and aggressive plans to seize territories are consistent with the Russian strategy aimed at intimidating the world.

In fact, the conflict between the two states was inevitable, because deep contradictions between them regarding civilizational development paths had been brewing for a long time, but Ukraine chose the European integration vector for itself, and the difficult domestic political situation in Ukraine only acted as a catalyst for an open clash of interests. This situation following the Revolution of Dignity was characterized by multidirectional processes: on the one hand, the strengthening of civil society and collective solidarity, and on the other, the activation of separatist movements in Crimea and Donbas.

6. The influence of the Russian-Ukrainian war on the strengthening of irredentist narrative in Europe

Russia's war against Ukraine, which has been ongoing since 2014, has revealed weaknesses in the system of international relations, as evidenced by the indecision and inconsistency of international organizations in condemning the aggressor. Although international organizations (UN, IAEA and others) condemn the actions of the aggressor country, there are no mechanisms of effective influence on it. Moreover, the Russian Federation remains a member of the UN Security Council. This is a holdover from the bipolar era and would be very difficult to rectify. Many countries of the Global South still listen to Russia and try to establish partnership relations with it, which is facilitated by energy and food dependence on the Russian Federation. It is against this background that irredentist narrative is intensifying in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

In the spring of 2023, Romanian senator and leader of the SOS party, Diana Șoșoacă, presented a legislative proposal entitled "Law on Amendments to Law No. 129/1997 on the Ratification of the Treaty on Good Neighbourly Relations and Cooperation between Romania and Ukraine", in which she argued that Romania should "annex historical territories" that once belonged to the Romanian state and now belong to Ukraine. In particular, "Romania annexes the historical territories that belonged to it, namely North Bucovina, Hertsa region, Bugeacul (Cahul, Bolgrad, Izmail), historical Maramureș and the island of Serpilor". The statement states that "with this approach, we want to restore the cultural identity, traditions, customs and religion of the Romanian

population, which numbers approximately 1 million Romanians, including mixed families" (Senatoarea Șoșoacă, 2023).

At the beginning of 2024, the leaders of the right-wing radical Hungarian and Romanian parties made statements of an irredentist nature. Thus, on January 27, 2024, at the congress of the far-right Hungarian party "Our Fatherland", its leader László Toroczkai said that if the state of Ukraine ceases to exist as a result of the war, this state will claim Transcarpathia (Hungary far-right, 2024). And on January 28, 2024, the leader of the Romanian far-right party "Alliance for the Unification of Romanians", Claudiu Tărziu, called for the "reintegration" of the Romanian state in its "natural borders", declaring at a speech in Iași that "Northern Bukovyna cannot be forgotten! Southern Bessarabia cannot be forgotten! The Hertsa region, Transcarpathia, everything that was and is the Romanian people must return to the borders of the same state!" (Shcho stoit za pretenziami ultrapravykh, 2024). We see typical statements of the irredentist direction, because irredentism is primarily based on the idea of some "unliberated lands" that must be included in the state. Irredentists resort to various arguments to justify their intentions: protection of a related minority from oppression – real or imagined; protection of the rights of people who speak the same language; restoration of historical rights to the territory and, more broadly, "restoration of historical justice" in any interpretation.

These statements should not be considered situational, because the irredentist component is contained in the programs of these and other radical political parties. At the end of the 1990s, the "Great Romania" party emerged, the program of which states: "As can be seen from its name, Great Romania stands for the peaceful realization of Great Romania, within its historical borders" (Statutul Partidului România Mare). It is noted that the party pursues the ideals of national unity, territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence. In November 2000, the leader of the "Greater Romania" party, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, entered the second round of the presidential elections, and, in the parliamentary elections of the same year, this party received part of the mandates. Great-power sentiments in Romania regarding Moldova, Northern Bukovyna (Chernivtsi region) and part of Bessarabia (Khotyn district of Chernivtsi region and the southern part of Odesa region) developed especially during the presidency of Traian Băsescu (2004-2014).

In Hungary, Great Power ideas are promoted by the Fidesz party, whose representative is the Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orban. Within the country, Fidesz has been in the lead in parliamentary and local elections for a long time. In particular, the party won the parliamentary elections in 2014, 2018 and 2022. The ideas of irredentism are also promoted by the party "Jobbik" ("For a better Hungary"). The work of the Jobbik party with the Hungarians of Transcarpathia became more active on the eve of the parliamentary elections in Hungary (spring 2014), but even after becoming a parliamentary party, Jobbik continued its radical appeals. At the April session of PACE (2014), a delegate from this political power declared that Crimea is Russian territory, and Transcarpathia is Hungarian (Potikha, 2014, p. 40). At

today's stage, the Jobbik party has changed its ideology and turned from far-right pro-Russian nationalists into champions of liberal Europe. Moreover, it is an opponent of the Fidesz party.

The very fact that the statements made at the beginning of 2024 may seem illogical against the background of the fact that both Hungary and Romania are members of the EU and NATO, and therefore, according to the norms of these organizations, they must refrain from any territorial claims. An important condition for joining NATO and the EU is the absence of ethnic or territorial disputes. The Alliance's New Strategic Concept (1991) states that "risks to Allied security are less likely to result from calculated aggression against Allied territory, but rather from the adverse effects of instability that may result from severe economic, social and political difficulties, including ethnic rivalries and territorial disputes, which are faced by many countries of Central and Eastern Europe" (The Alliance's New Strategic Concept, 1991). And at the meeting of the European Council in Copenhagen on June 21-22, 1993, the conditions for joining the EU (Copenhagen criteria) were adopted, which established, among others, the requirement to settle territorial, ethnic and other conflicts on the basis of international legal norms (European Council, 1993, p. 2).

Given the above, armed aggression by these countries would seem impossible, but such statements are actually very harmful. First, the promotion of territorial disintegration of Ukraine harms these states themselves, because the Russian Federation's entry into their borders would mean having an aggressor neighbour next to them, which, of course, is not a desirable prospect. Thus, at a joint briefing of the leaders of the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary after the Visegrad Four summit in Prague in February 2024, the Prime Minister of Hungary V. Orbán stated that it is in the interests of Hungary, and this is the most important problem of the country's national security, not to have a common border with Russia, because Hungarians have bad memories of it (Hungary's most, 2024). Secondly, statements of irredentist content cause aggravation of the relations of these countries with Ukraine, because they call into question the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

Despite this, statements, sometimes from representatives of parliamentary parties, were heard and received considerable resonance both among society and among international political circles. We will give several explanations regarding the reasons for the actualization of irredentist narrative.

First, the idea of a "Great Power" is quite popular in Hungary and Romania, the content of which is a call to restore the lost territorial power of a once great state by including in its composition the territories to which it is believed that there is a certain "historical right" to possess. In Hungary, this idea is supplemented by ideas that the division of the people associated with the so-called "Trianon trauma". And, although there are no official territorial claims to Ukraine on the part of the higher political elites of Hungary and Romania, the great-power narrative has many supporters, and the idea itself lives in the socio-political discourse. S. Saideman and W. Ayres, researching two types of irredentist disputes between the states of Eastern Europe,

determined that in some the initiators are pit bulls who actively seek to implement their territorial claims, such as Serbia and Croatia in the early 1990s, and in others there are so-called quiet dogs that do not bark, like Hungary or Romania (Saideman&Ayres, 2008). However, sometimes even high-ranking politicians allow themselves to demonstrate their commitment to the great-power idea, as Hungarian Prime Minister V. Orbán did, by appearing in November 2022 at a football match of the Hungarian national team with a scarf depicting a map of “Greater Hungary” with parts of neighbouring states in its composition.

Secondly, the popularity of the great-power narrative is closely related to the identity crisis that is taking place in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which in the early 1990s faced the fact that integration processes pose new challenges to European states and may even provoke crisis. The ruling elites of Poland and Hungary constantly emphasize the threat of loss of national identity, which is presented to the public as an urgent problem. Firstly, the identity crisis exacerbates due to the contradiction between new European and traditional national values. Secondly, there is an asymmetry in the formulation and implementation of EU policy towards less developed countries, which calls into question their subjectivity and sovereignty compared to more developed countries (Khorishko&Horlo, 2021, p. 15). Emphasis is placed on finding ways to solve the problem of the identity crisis, which will help preserve the traditions of state formation and prevent the loss of sovereignty in the context of deepening European integration processes. In our opinion, in this case, the popularity of the great-power narrative plays the role of a kind of compensatory mechanism for society.

Thirdly, the intensification of irredentist narrative at the current stage is undoubtedly related to the influence of the foreign political situation, because the statements of the leaders of the right-wing radical parties were made against the background of the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian war and Russia's occupation of part of the territory of Ukraine. The occupation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 did not provoke decisive action on the part of the international community, which, in fact, to a large extent led to the escalation of the war in the form of full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022. Against this background, radical Hungarian and Romanian politicians seek to seize the moment and declare their own intentions.

Fourth, irredentist slogans are expressed by the political forces of the far-right wing of the party spectrum, which have distinct nationalist rhetoric and resort to populist statements and try to form a target audience. Given the high public interest in the great-power narrative, these parties receive the support of a part of the electorate. This is a pragmatic calculation to increase the rating of the party and get a higher level of electoral support. P. Carter and G. Pop-Eleches (2024) assert that the electoral success of right-wing populist parties is significantly determined by the electorate's attitudes towards historical territorial losses and the presence of a backward-looking victimization framing. This conclusion is substantiated by the analysis of empirical studies conducted in 2020-2021 in Romania, Hungary, Germany, and

Turkey. According to the latest poll, 18% of Romanians are ready to vote for AUR (Alliance for the Unification of Romanians), 6% for SOS. That is, every fourth Romanian is ready to vote for politicians who propose the revival of Greater Romania (Shcho stoit za pretenziiam ultrapravykh, 2024). G. Pop-Eleches analyzed the determinants of electorate support for radical-right populist (PRR) parties in the December 2024 parliamentary elections in Romania and concluded that the electorate's political attitudes matched key elements of the PRR parties' electoral ideological appeal, including anti-Western orientation, ethnic intolerance, social conservatism, irredentism, and an embrace of a populist victimization discourse (Pop-Eleches, 2025, p. 389). Conversely, pure protest voting played only a modest role in the electoral success of these parties.

The strengthening of right-wing political parties and movements in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe is also related to the identity crisis. Considering the objective difficulties and problems on the way to European integration and the vision of integration as a threat to national sovereignty and national identity, these parties try to gain advantages in the existing situation and introduce right-wing populist ideas that emphasize the unity of society and the revival of traditional values (Khorishko&Horlo, 2021, p. 15). The influence of statements with an irredentist component should not be underestimated, because populism affects a democratic society and, most likely, will change the style and content of public discourse, even if it does not become ruling power or does not seek to change the constitution (Urbinati, 2019, p. 114). Indeed, today irredentist narrative can become a tool of "soft power" and a means of influencing the politics of other states where related ethnic groups live. Most often, this tool is used by Hungary, declaring the oppression of the rights of the ethnic Hungarian population in Ukraine.

7. Conclusions

Irredentism is a political process that exerts a noticeable influence on the nature of international relations, starting from the 19th century and up to today. The perception of "unliberated" territories and their population is a powerful driver of the state's foreign policy course. Irredentism has evolved since its inception, as each system of international relations established new foundations for the world order; from the 19th century to the beginning of the 21st century, the reorientation of irredentism from purely unifying goals to expansionist goals takes place.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the Russian Federation began to implement an irredentist policy. Under the slogans of protecting the related population, it occupied Crimea and Donbas, and in February 2022, it launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine and occupied a significant territory. This proved the relevance of irredentism at the current stage of the development of international relations.

Despite the consolidation of the principles of territorial integrity and the inviolability of state borders in international law, irredentist narrative still

has a place in modern European political practice in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, because, on the one hand, as a result of the existence of the great-power idea in the public discourse, there is a demand for irredentist slogans from society, and on the other hand, there are dangerous precedents of implementation of the irredentist policy by the Russian Federation, the reaction to which was not decisive enough on the part of the world community. The spread of ideas of irredentism is also taking place in the wake of the strengthening of populism positions in Europe, caused, among other things, by the identity crisis that has gripped the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the context of European integration processes and which is associated with fears of the loss of traditional values and sovereignty.

The research hypothesis has been confirmed: the intensification of irredentist rhetoric in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe occurred partly under the influence of the expansionism of the Russian Federation, which did not receive a firm response from the international community in 2014, and partly as a result of an identity crisis within the context of European integration. This combination of factors contributed to the popularization of the “Great State” idea and to the strengthening of the influence of right-wing populist parties.

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