

PERCEPTION OF UKRAINE IN SPAIN AND PORTUGAL AFTER 2022

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Introduction

The relevance of the study stems from the onset of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Many countries have determined their role and position regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war. Spain and Portugal condemned Russian aggression in February 2022, expressed their support and solidarity with Ukraine, and supported all UN resolutions. The Kingdom of Spain and Portugal strongly supported granting Ukraine candidate status for EU membership. Portugal is one of the countries that recognized the Holodomor as genocide and voted for the North Atlantic Council to recognize Ukraine as a member of NATO's Enhanced Opportunities Program. These countries are important international actors in supporting Ukraine on the global stage and in combating Russian propaganda and efforts to discredit Ukraine internationally.

Spain's Position in the Russian-Ukrainian War

The last decade has seen intensification and strengthening foreign policy of Spain. According to Spain's Foreign Action Strategy for 2021-2024, the Kingdom of Spain aims to actively participate in global politics to form a broad national consensus in shaping its foreign relations. This document is based on Spain's interest in maintaining international significance and strengthening its global presence. Spain's foreign policy orientation is shaped by its global aspirations and multi-dimensional identity, which, aside from its European essence and Mediterranean roots, includes deep and irreversible ties with Latin America, strong relations with Africa, and transatlantic connections with the United States. Spain's unique strategic position between Europe and Africa, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Atlantic Ocean makes it an ideal interlocutor, capable of providing a

comprehensive vision and having the ability to engage in dialogue in many regional and global conflicts (Foreign Action Strategy 2021-2024).

Spain's modern foreign policy has changed significantly, shifting from a domestic focus to a more pronounced international one. Spain has become more active in its foreign policy within the EU framework, ranking among the top countries providing aid to Ukraine. Between 2021 and 2024, Spain has established a leadership role in building Europe, closely cooperating with EU institutions and reaching consensus with member states on specific programs.

There are also historical factors that contributed to Spain's increased involvement in modern political processes. The first is Spain's neutrality during World War II; the second is the Franco dictatorship, which left a mark of prolonged international isolation on Spain. The third is the exhausting Civil War, which for a long time made Spain focus on internal issues rather than external ones. Finally, a current and highly relevant factor is Spain's dissatisfaction regarding the issue of Gibraltar, which, according to international law, is a British overseas territory.

A major factor in the perception of the Russian-Ukrainian war has been the intensification of Spanish-Ukrainian relations prior to the full-scale invasion. In 2018, former President Petro Poroshenko visited Spain for the first time in 22 years at the level of heads of state. The visit marked the first such event since the appointment of Spain's new Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez. Spain became an important partner for Ukraine in its resistance to Russian aggression. For the first time in the history of relations between Spain and Ukraine, on February 23, 2023, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez visited Kyiv to meet with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and also visited Bucha and Irpin. Spain joined the coalition of countries providing tanks to Ukraine to fight the aggressor (Vakarchuk, 2023).

Spain was included in the list of 18 countries that will help rebuild Ukraine in the future. The Kingdom of Spain consistently provides financial assistance for the restoration of infrastructure and Ukrainian heritage sites, and delivers military aid on an unprecedented scale: air defence systems, armoured vehicles, ammunition, equipment, humanitarian aid, and more. Spain also organized basic

training for soldiers of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and was one of the first countries to provide humanitarian support to Ukraine's military in 2014. Throughout 2022, Spain provided Ukraine with more than 300 million euros in military aid. Ukrainian soldiers are undergoing rehabilitation and treatment in Spain (Militarnyi, 2022).

Spain was one of the first to join the European Peace Facility (EPF), which was established in March 2021 to enhance the European Union's security guarantees for its citizens and partners. This allowed the EU to provide all types of equipment and infrastructure to the armed forces of EU partners in accordance with international law, human rights, and international humanitarian law (Spain, 2022).

An important sign of Spain's support for Ukraine on the international stage was the March 31, 2023 visit of Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez to China, with the aim of persuading the country's leader Xi Jinping to support peace on Ukraine's terms. According to Pedro Sánchez, this visit might reorient China toward a pro-European stance on Russia's war against Ukraine. Spain views China's position as decisive in ending the war. Furthermore, Spain chaired the Council of Europe during the second half of 2023, placing the issue of aid to Ukraine on the agenda. Spain was the most recent state to join Ukraine's lawsuit against Russia under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which is being heard by the International Court of Justice (Smyshliaiev, 2023).

In March 2023, the 28th Ibero-American Summit took place, bringing together 22 countries (19 Latin American and Caribbean nations and 3 countries from the Iberian Peninsula – Spain, Andorra, and Portugal). The Ibero-American Summits are high-level meetings within the framework of the international dialogue forum known as the Ibero-American Conference (Shevchenko, 2023). Many issues concerning regional development were discussed, but it was significant that the condemnation of Russian aggression in Ukraine was on the agenda. It was noted that Ukraine is in the focus of attention for the Ibero-

American world, particularly with the idea that Latin American countries, Spain, and Portugal could play a more active role in resolving and ending the Russo-Ukrainian war. While there was no unanimity on many issues or a fully formed common position, it was emphasized that “the peace plan for Ukraine is a relevant issue” and we must make efforts and not allow the Russian narrative to penetrate decision-making processes (Shevchenko, 2023).

Pedro Sánchez began Spain’s presidency of the Council of Europe in the second half of 2023 with a trip to Kyiv to demonstrate the EU’s support for Ukraine in military, humanitarian, and economic spheres, and concluded it by opening negotiations on Ukraine’s accession to the European Union. Spain’s presidency aimed to address a complex international context, marked by the consequences of Russian aggression, geopolitical shifts, technological changes, and transformations driven by environmental challenges. These include the EU’s industrial restructuring and ensuring its open strategic autonomy, reducing dependency on third countries in areas such as energy, healthcare, digital technologies, and food security. The EU’s support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression was consolidated during Spain’s six-month presidency, as became clear with the signing of the Granada Declaration, adopted by heads of state and government, in which they reaffirmed their support for Ukraine and the Ukrainian people for as long as necessary (Elcano Royal Institute, 2023).

The document notes that the future of “new members” lies within the EU, but “efforts to reform must be accelerated”. European leaders, who met on October 5-6 in Granada, Spain, signed a declaration outlining the EU’s strategic course and priorities. This declaration is one of the intermediate stages of negotiations before the adoption of a new Strategic Agenda. “The pandemic and Russia’s aggressive war against Ukraine have tested our resilience, highlighting the need for the Union to strengthen its sovereignty and prompting us to make important decisions to protect our people and our economies” (Elcano Royal Institute, 2023).

On May 27, 2024, Ukrainian President V. Zelensky arrived in Spain, where he signed a bilateral security agreement with Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez. Spain

became the tenth country with which Ukraine has signed a bilateral security agreement under the provisions of the Joint Declaration adopted by Ukraine and the members of the “Group of Seven” in Vilnius on July 12, 2023. A total of 32 countries have already joined the Joint Declaration. Spain is providing Ukraine with €1 billion in aid this year. Additionally, Spain plans to allocate €5 billion for Ukraine by 2027 (Official Internet Representation of the President of Ukraine, 2024). Upon arrival in Spain, the Ukrainian delegation was personally greeted by King Felipe VI, demonstrating the high level of trust and deep respect for Ukraine. Zelenskyy also met with Spanish parliamentarians, representatives of all parties in the Congress of Deputies and the Senate of the General Cortes during his visit to Spain.

Position of Portugal Concerning the Russian-Ukrainian War

Since 2022, Portugal has expressed comprehensive support for Ukraine. Although relations between the two states were not systematic, in recent years Ukraine has significantly deepened its political dialogue with Portugal. Cooperation between the parliaments of both countries played a significant role in expanding intergovernmental relations. After the full-scale invasion, the Portuguese government, together with the Armed Forces, sent weapons and ammunition, personal protective and communication equipment, armoured personnel carriers, unmanned aerial surveillance vehicles, medical equipment, and combat first-aid kits to Ukraine. Portugal became part of the European Union’s new military assistance mission to Ukraine. On May 28, 2024, in Lisbon, the President of Ukraine and the Prime Minister of Portugal, Luís Montenegro, signed a bilateral security cooperation agreement. Specific sections of the agreement are dedicated to bilateral cooperation in the defence industry, intelligence, combating organized crime and propaganda, and addressing chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear risks (Official Internet Representation of the President of Ukraine, 2024).

In 2024, Portugal committed to providing Ukraine with €126 million in military support. During this year, Portugal has already allocated €100 million to a Czech initiative for the procurement of ammunition to support Ukraine. Portugal will contribute additional military support to Ukraine, particularly within the framework of the European Union, NATO, and other relevant international forums. Portugal provides both lethal and non-lethal military equipment, including Leopard 2A6 main battle tanks, UAV systems, M113 armoured personnel carriers, M113 and M577 armoured medical evacuation vehicles, and other military equipment. Portugal is also part of the F-16 coalition and the international maritime security capabilities coalition, as well as joint programs for the procurement of large-calibre ammunition, which are being carried out by the Czech Republic and the European Defence Agency (Official Internet Representation of the President of Ukraine, 2024).

A very important component of Ukraine's perception in Portugal is the active informational and explanatory work among government, parliamentary, expert circles, Portuguese public, and the Ukrainian diaspora, aimed at countering the disinformation spread by Russian media. In general, the problem of Russian propaganda in Spain and Portugal is quite significant. For many reasons, the discrediting of Ukraine's image by propaganda channels like Russia Today, Sputnik Mundo, and RTVi remains a challenge.

Since early 2014, there has been an active spread of anti-Ukrainian propaganda in Portugal, characterized by typical Russian messages and narratives. Signs of a targeted negative anti-Ukrainian information campaign were noticed by volunteers from the Ukrainian diaspora in Portugal, who are part of the InformNapalm initiative. Ukraine was labelled as “the cradle of modern global Nazism” and “a training ground for neo-Nazis from around the world”. Such publications have been periodically repeated and once even sparked a diplomatic scandal. These information attacks occur regularly, and at times, the so-called “Immortal Regiment” provokes clashes on the streets of Lisbon. Propaganda channels frequently spread disinformation accusing Ukrainians of fascism,

Nazism, and neo-Nazism. A prominent example is Mamadou Ba, a well-known figure in Portugal for his racist remarks, who leads the organization SOS Racismo (InformNapalm, 2020).

For instance, the leading Portuguese newspaper *Público* has published various articles, including those on the Crimea Platform, Ukraine's Euro-integration and Euro-Atlantic aspirations, and the recognition of the Holodomor of 1932-1933 as genocide of the Ukrainian people. These materials generated significant interest in Portuguese society, as evidenced by the feedback: 1,512 users shared these articles on social media, and 469 posted their comments (Ognivets, 2022).

The Ukrainian diaspora in Portugal has repeatedly appealed to the parliament, urging them to pay attention to the emergence of fake news and publications promoting the narratives of the aggressor country – Russia, which poses a threat not only to Ukraine but also to Portugal's political interests. Portugal has provided and continues to provide political support to Ukraine in its fight for sovereignty and independence.

In Portugal, the organization “Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots in Portugal” is one of the most active. The head of this association claims that there are 50,000 “Russian-speaking people” in Portugal, although this is not the case. According to this association, all Ukrainians are potential carriers of the “Russian World”. The blog created on Facebook by the so-called “Compatriots’ Council” reflects a new infiltration of propagandist sources targeting the Ukrainian diaspora in Portugal, aiming to impose a discussion on “tolerance” of Russians toward Ukrainians and denying Russian aggression against an independent state (InformNapalm, 2020).

As Y. Brailian notes in his research on Russian propaganda in Spain, the kremlin has long been working on internal destabilization in Spain, an EU and NATO member state. Spain is essential for Russia because, through it, Russian propaganda pushes its narratives to other Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America. A study by the Brookings Institution indicated that RT en Español has

more subscribers than the English-language account of the Russian propagandist resource (Brailian, 2024).

In Spain, Russian Spanish-language channels are also actively operating. For example, “Sur in Russian” is published as a paper supplement to the newspaper “Diario Sur”, which is distributed in southern Spain and is aimed at Russian-speaking immigrants. Unfortunately, articles concerning Ukraine are presented in a biased manner and often contain false information. Most Spanish-language media reports about Ukraine are produced by correspondents based in Russia. On a positive note, for the first time, the High Court of Barcelona handed down Spain’s first sentence for spreading fake news. The individual who disseminated false information received a suspended prison sentence and a fine for publishing a fake video about migrants. Each of these fakes is aimed at discrediting Ukraine, weakening it, and making people believe in an unreal, fabricated world pushed by Russian propagandists. In Ukraine, the Eastern Variant website was created to debunk fakes and expose the falsehoods of Russian propaganda (Moskvychova, 2019).

The respected publication “El Confidencial” publishes daily materials about Ukraine. Since 2014, a narrative has developed in Spanish society that aid to Ukraine is critically needed, but militarization should be avoided. Since February 24, 2022, public opinion has shifted, and Ukrainian refugees have played a significant role in this change. In Spain, they self-organize and provide significant assistance both to other refugees and directly to Ukraine’s needs. The Kingdom of Spain has taken in 160,000 Ukrainian refugees, who have been granted temporary protection (Majumdar, 2022).

Spain and Portugal are working to increase national unity among their populations and to prevent the fragmentation of their territories into separate, independent regions. Spain has been and remains an active player on the world stage, and Russian aggression has pushed the government to reassess Spanish-Ukrainian relations. After a prolonged pause, the Kingdom of Spain has reinvigorated its relations with Ukraine, providing massive financial support,

military equipment, and assistance in rebuilding critical infrastructure. From this perspective, Spain is a reliable partner for Ukraine.

Conclusion

The support of Spain and Portugal is very important for Ukraine, as these geographically distant countries are powerful international actors in European security sphere. The spread of disinformation and the discrediting of Ukraine's image by Russia are actively promoted in Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries. It is necessary to respond and take all possible measures to convey truthful information, both to Ukrainians living abroad and to the citizens of these countries. We can hope that the activity of Spain and Portugal in addressing global issues will become more visible and that their focus on internal problems will no longer affect their stance on important foreign policy matters. After 2022 for Ukraine Spain and Portugal have become closer in all aspects of aid, cooperation, and interaction, which could positively influence the development of bilateral relations in the future.

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