

# **RECONCILIATION OF THE UKRAINE-POLAND CONFLICT: THE IMPACT OF BACKLASH AND STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING IT**

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## **Abstract**

On the surface, relations between Ukraine and Poland may appear positive and successful. In reality, however, they are mired in deep socio-political conflict, and the two nations have not yet achieved reconciliation despite attempts by state leaders to do so. The reconciliation between Ukraine and Poland and, especially why it has not been achieved, is scarcely studied in academic literature. Therefore, this thesis will delve into the question of what exactly prevents reconciliation between the two countries and argue that it is primarily due to the popular backlash against the state actions in both countries. Moreover, the thesis will note that this backlash prevents reconciliation because it is not a single unrelated episode but rather interdependent cycles of reciprocal backlash. To address this issue profoundly and empirically groundedly, the thesis will draw on both primary sources showing how and why backlash prevents reconciliation, including materials in Polish, Russian and Ukrainian languages, and secondary academic research. The key significance of the thesis lies in the fact that, by drawing on the practical evidence of relations between Ukraine and Poland and analysing similar cases of backlash around the world, it presents a set of strategies on how such backlash can be overcome in the domestic arenas of each country and through inter-state cooperation. Overcoming the backlash and achieving reconciliation will, in turn, be crucial for both political relations between the countries and the normal existence of citizens of both nations, especially in the current realities of the common threat from Russia.

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# Introduction

On a superficial examination, Ukrainian-Polish relations may seem amicable and favourable, especially recently against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the re-emergence of the Russian threat (see further Korab-Karpowicz 2023). However, in reality, under the screen of positive interactions lies a significant and profound socio-political conflict that the parties have not been able to overcome for several decades and that prevents the two countries from genuine rapprochement and reconciliation. This conflict has its roots in the deep history of bilateral relations and is directly connected to national traumas that Poles and Ukrainians inflicted on each other. More importantly, in practice, attempts at reconciliation between Ukraine and Poland often cause popular backlash, not from a minority but from the majority of the population and sometimes even politicians and media. Despite having been studied very little in academic literature, this backlash is an essential factor that does not allow the conflict to be resolved. Therefore, a thorough, well-rounded and critical examination, especially given contemporary developments in bilateral relations, of why reconciliation still cannot happen, what role this backlash plays in it and how the latter can be overcome for the sake of achieving mutually beneficial relations is necessary.

Thus, as a starting point, the thesis will use Jennifer Lind's argument that backlash on either side will increase the threat perception of the opposing side (Lind 2008) but will go much further than this. It will connect this finding to reconciliation problems and substantially show that backlash can also negatively affect the latter. In this regard, it is paramount to primarily underline the following findings. Charles Glaser notes that the absence of backlash on acts of remembrance indicates "the stability of a country's consensus on its history", while its presence suggests the instability of a society's understanding of its history (Glaser et al. 2009, 342). The absence of a domestic backlash also becomes a signal to the other side that the country in

question is credible for reconciliation and ready for further cooperation, while its presence calls into question whether the country is credible in its intentions, aspirations and actions when it comes to past wrong-doings (Glaser et al. 2009, 359). Finally, Lind herself emphasises that if backlash can be avoided, reconciliation can be achieved more efficiently and thoroughly by opposing societies (see Lind 2008).

Based on the above, the thesis will delve into the question of why reconciliation between Ukraine and Poland has not yet happened despite numerous attempts to achieve it and the seeming existence of common ground. Indeed, intuitively, it may seem that there should be much more reconciliation between Ukraine and Poland in the current realities, as there is a historical and national affinity between them, and they now share a common threat perception of Russia. However, despite this, in reality, meaningful reconciliation has not happened even now; on the contrary, the countries are further away from achieving reconciliation now than in past decades. Such empirical developments create an interesting research puzzle about what and why exactly prevents reconciliation between Ukraine and Poland. Addressing such a research puzzle, this thesis argues that in the case of Ukraine and Poland, it is primarily due to the public backlash that hinders reconciliation and occurs when people feel that state attempts to address the problems of the past and achieve rapprochement are incorrect or insufficient. The thesis further asserts that the backlash is the main obstacle to reconciliation in the present case because it represents not isolated episodes but rather ongoing cycles of retaliatory backlash that engulf both nations. In addition, the thesis notes that analysing reconciliation through the lens of the backlash allows for the understanding that, contrary to traditional arguments, reconciliation occurs not so much at the state level and through the actions of political leaders but in domestic societies and depends on the reactions of the population. Thus, this thesis fills an academic gap in the literature's neglect of developments in domestic arenas and presents a different approach to assessing reconciliation and why it may not happen.

Accordingly, the relevance and significance of the findings of this thesis lie in the fact that although reconciliation has been problematised by some scholars to a certain extent, there is no thorough work on the Ukraine-Poland case study and even less so on backlash in domestic arenas as a critical factor hindering reconciliation. Most importantly, addressing the issue of reconciliation between Ukraine and Poland and suggesting how the backlash can be overcome is crucial because it problematises contemporary issues in Ukrainian-Polish relations against the background of the Russian invasion. The existence of the backlash and, therefore, the lack of reconciliation causes several significant problems in the interaction between Ukraine and Poland, both on the state and social levels, which negatively affects both sides. Because of the reconciliation backlash, instead of joining forces to confront Russia as a common external threat, Ukraine and Poland are antagonising each other. Furthermore, as long as there is such a backlash between Ukraine and Poland and the socio-political relations between them are still tense, both countries will be more likely to be targeted by propaganda and other adverse actions from Russia, which will see such a backlash as an opportunity to advance its position in the Eastern European region. In addition, as shown by examples of social conflict, including but not limited to the ongoing Polish farmers' protests, the lack of reconciliation and the persistence of backlash negatively impacts, among other things, the status and living conditions of ordinary citizens in both countries that suffer from the past instances of backlash, which is particularly damaging in times of crisis. Thus, only through understanding that backlash needs to be overcome to achieve mutually beneficial developments and arguing how this can be achieved will it be possible to resolve the problems between the two countries when it is most needed. Accordingly, the thesis will empirically address precisely these issues.

In terms of research methods, to achieve the set objectives, this thesis will rely on both secondary sources that discuss the issues academically and primary sources in the form of various official documents and media coverage of events and social developments. At the same

time, the range of sources addressed and analysed is not limited to English-language sources and will cover materials in the languages relevant to the case study - Polish, Russian and Ukrainian. Furthermore, the thesis will create a theoretical framework for analysing how and why the backlash affects reconciliation and then apply it to the practical case of the socio-political conflict between Ukraine and Poland. To create its own framework for analysing the impact of backlash, the thesis, drawing on existing academic findings on backlash and reconciliation, broadens, problematises, reshapes and, in places, criticises them. To empirically assess reconciliation and the corresponding backlash of the Ukrainian-Polish conflict, the thesis examines the main inter-national contradictions and traumas and analyses a series of practical examples of backlash throughout the history of Ukrainian-Polish relations. In addition, the thesis also proposes which courses of action the two countries can use to overcome the backlash in practice by conducting a comparative analysis of the Ukrainian-Polish case of reconciliation with similar significant examples from around the world. Thus, the thesis provides an analytical lens through which the impact of the backlash on reconciliation in other practical cases can be thoroughly analysed.

The thesis is structured as follows. The first chapter will present the theoretical framework for the thesis and examine different approaches to understanding reconciliation in international relations and the place of the backlash in this process. The second chapter will then provide a contextualisation of the Ukrainian-Polish conflict and examine the main historical milestones that have created national traumas for the two peoples that are still unresolved. Subsequently, the third chapter will provide empirical evidence on how backlash manifests itself and prevents reconciliation between the two countries and show what causes it. Finally, the fourth and final chapter will provide its own critical argumentation on how backlash can be overcome at national and inter-state levels. The conclusion will wrap up the discussion of the impact of the backlash on the reconciliation of relations between nations.



# Chapter 1. The theoretical framework of the thesis

## 1.1 Different approaches to reconciliation in international relations

As envisioned in the introduction, reconciliation is still not sufficiently researched in the academic literature on international relations. Basically, it can be understood as a process in which “two former foes deal with their unhappy past [and] ... reach agreement on perceiving and treating their inimical history” (Wu and Yang 2016, 649). Nevertheless, the first chapter identifies several existing quality-distinctive works based on which a framework will be created to analyse the reconciliation of the conflict between Poland and Ukraine and the nature and impact of the backlash on it. Largely, the existing academic shortcomings in theorising reconciliation persist because Western-centric literature predominantly discusses reconciliation and related developments in the domestic rather than interstate domain (Wu and Yang 2016). In turn, this thesis argues that to properly understand and analyse reconciliation, it is necessary to consider not only intra-state but also inter-state reconciliation.

As for the literature advancing the academic understanding of reconciliation, Chengqiu Wu and Fan Yang fundamentally note that “[f]or two former antagonistic states to become friends and reach peace, they not only need to overcome the security dilemma in general, but also to go through a process of reconciliation” (2016, 645). These conclusions are extremely important in the framework of this thesis as they show that to achieve genuinely amicable and efficient relations that are free from conflict, it is not enough for countries to reach a superficial agreement; they have to rather go through a comprehensive path of reconciliation. Such findings also challenge the common academic argument that reconciliation and peacebuilding are the same. Similarly, William Long and Peter Brecke conclude that reconciliation is the “part of a forgiveness process characterised by truth telling, redefinition of the identity of the former belligerents, partial justice, and a call for a new relationship” (2003, 3). They further

believe that understanding and implementing reconciliation according to these foundations is sufficient to address the conflict. However, the thesis maintains that although these elements are important and should indeed be included in the process, it is paramount to also focus on additional elements since reconciliation is too complex to be narrowed down to this extent.

Accordingly, delving further into the theorisation of reconciliation of inter-state relations, the following fundamental elements should be noted. To begin with, Daniel Bar-Tal and Gemma Bennink underline that reconciliation, contrary to past academic understandings, is not so much a directly political as a psychological development, and that it is the psychological issues in nation-level relations that need to be addressed to achieve reconciliation (2004, 17-19). Thus, this thesis, in contrast to narrow approaches, understands reconciliation as “stable and lasting peace characterized by mutual recognition and acceptance, invested interests and goals in developing peaceful relations, as well as fully normalized, cooperative political, economic, and cultural relations” (Bar-Tal and Bennink 2004, 16). Moreover, the process of reconciliation itself “encompasses psychological changes of motivations, goals, beliefs, attitudes, and emotions, which are reflected in structural changes” (Bar-Tal and Bennink 2004, 24). Finding himself on a par with Bar-Tal and Bennink, Henri Tajfel further notes that to understand and utilise “both interstate and intrastate reconciliation adequately, politics and psychology must be brought together” since “much of our reluctance to ‘come to terms with the past’ is underpinned by our need to protect our collective ego” (Tajfel 1982 cited in Tang 2011, 727). The thesis argues that it is such a comprehensive examination of reconciliation through the psychology of the peoples and their motivations, beliefs, attitudes and emotions rather than just elitist politics that will help to correctly address the complexity of reconciliation problems.

Related to the previous argument, in-depth theorisations of reconciliation that are necessary to correctly account for complex cases can be found in Yinan He's work. He notes that complete reconciliation in practice consists of "two key components – stable peace and an amicable atmosphere – that cover both intergovernmental and people-to-people relationships" (2009, 13). Accordingly, she emphasises the need for its implementation not only in the political but also in the social spheres when the inter-connected advances in each will be equally meaningful. At the same time, He justifiably extends the framework to introduce institutional developments, processes and structures (2009, 14). Similar significant findings are also found in Charles Kupchan, who claims that "the degree of peace does not always reflect the degree of reconciliation" (2010, 12-13). In other words, Kupchan's findings suggest that peace and the presence of relations on the one hand and reconciliation and deep, mutually beneficial ties on the other are different things, and the presence of one does not automatically entail the presence of the other.

Moreover, Shiping Tang analysing the concept of reconciliation further distinguishes between shallow and deep reconciliations, arguing that "in the former conflict is 'thinkable' and in the latter conflict is 'unthinkable'" (2011, 719). This contribution is fundamental to the thesis framework as it not only emphasises that reconciliation can have different levels of depth but also notes that reconciliation not fully implemented will not completely rule out the possibility of future conflict. This is so because the opposite countries begin to question the potential of reconciliation to improve bilateral relations and address pressing historical traumas and stop seeing it as a remedy for the current situation. Finally, as Wu and Yang emphasise, "deep reconciliation not only requires the expansion of mutual understanding of history from political elites to the society in the horizontal dimension, but also the upgrading of relationship from one characterized by discrete gestures of apology and forgiveness to more institutionalized and deeper mutual understanding and affectionate restoration in the vertical

dimension” (2016, 649). In other words, only through deep reconciliation can common narratives about history be developed, identities of nations be changed from antagonistic to friendly and nationalistic tendencies in societies be overcome.

## **1.2 Backlash and its impact on the reconciliation of interstate interaction**

While the first section has presented a theoretical framework for operationalising reconciliation, the second will analyse the academic understanding of the backlash phenomenon and its impact on reconciliation and inter-state relations. Fundamentally, backlash can be understood as “a protest or a rapidly mobilised counter-movement [having] an important and direct negative response to a specific policy, decision or action that is portrayed as having gone too far” (Alter and Zürn 2020, 563-564). In other words, it is a process when population, political elites and national media individually or collectively hamper the process of rapprochement and overcoming the historical traumas of the past with the opposing country because they perceive the measures taken, the actions performed or the ongoing processes as a whole improper, inconsistent with national interests or going too far than necessary. The thesis will distinguish several seminal works on backlash that help to create a framework necessary to account for more complex cases.

Above all, as academics such as Damien Short and Rosalind Shaw point out, despite the neglect of the backlash issue in mainstream work on reconciliation, the concept of reconciliation itself naturally involves disruptive power in the realm of memory and thus inherently predisposes the potential for backlash from the population. This is so because “calls for remembrance in the cause of reconciliation are in effect paradoxically also calls for its containment” (Short 2005, 268; see also Shaw 2007), which can be used by nationalist or conservative forces to promote their own narratives and prevent rapprochement with the former

opponent. Moreover, measures and actions to achieve reconciliation may themselves become a new site for increased inter-ethnic conflict. In this regard, “some groups [will use] public acts of remembrance to foreclose an awareness of past crimes, while others seek to use the same procedures to bring them to the light of day” (Rigney 2012, 253). Such findings show that backlash is a natural development closely linked to reconciliation. Moreover, as Paul Ricœur notes, while issues of memory and commemoration, in theory, aim at telling the truth about the past to ensure national rapprochement, in practice, because of its very nature, memory frequently only reinforces the ‘divisiveness’ between nations (2000, 84-85). Although he does not express his findings strictly in the context of backlash, this thesis goes further and argues that this ‘divisiveness’ that is produced by using memory as a tool is precisely what provides backlash and makes reconciliation difficult if the way in which people remember certain events does not match how the problem is addressed and presented in politics.

Similarly, practices and actions of remembrance are often detrimental to beneficial and forward-looking relations because “as the reconciliation scenario has become more recognisable as a template for nation-building and as a discourse, it has also been appropriated by those looking for a quick way out of their responsibilities by offering apologies or making symbolic gestures” (Lowenthal 2009, 913). Continuing, “the reconciliation scenario itself may help obfuscate the fact that past injustices have persisted into the present and that a radical change in the present, and not just symbolic gestures towards the past, may be required” (Grandin 2005, 48). Such developments usually lead to backlash, as societies have already learnt to detect if the opposite states or even sometimes their own political actors have malign intentions regarding reconciliation and will oppose any acts aimed at reconciliation if they believe that the latter will bring more negative developments for society than benefits (see further Tang 2011, 716). Given reconciliation scenarios have become more frequent and clearer to the public, societies will also take note if the crucial problems of their relationship are

addressed by the other side not fundamentally to finally overcome the contradictions for the sake of moving forward together, but intentionally or unintentionally partly only to benefit themselves from the situation. In the latter case, society will also tend to evoke the backlash to prevent the use of narratives around memory even more for its disadvantage.

Delving deeper into the problematisation of the backlash, another reason it is often triggered is that the practical use of reconciliation in its current understanding “yield[s] only a “thin” form of mere co-existence ... rather than the “thicker” form of social integration and solidarity” (Crocker 2000, 108). What the current operationalisation of reconciliation as thin co-existence achieves in practice, on the contrary, lays down a huge number of backlash triggers for peoples that can explode at any moment because it does not allow the most urgent and fundamental problems to be addressed. Continuing the previous argumentation, as Michael Ignatieff notes, although “the discourse of reconciliation implies that orchestrated remembrance can somehow build bridges between former enemies, ... [its] effectiveness is dependent on the prior readiness of the opposing parties to bury the hatchet” (Ignatieff 1996 cited in Rigney 2012, 253). Developing and deepening this conclusion, the thesis posits that a key element in understanding the reconciliation backlash is that it occurs when peoples who have experienced violence, conflict, or other types of national trauma are morally and psychologically unprepared to accept moving on beyond past problems. In turn, this most often happens when states have not properly utilised education and other memory vectors to facilitate their nations overcome the dark past and accept what happened in the past.

Another fundamental aspect to understanding why reconciliation is tainted by backlash is that often attempts to achieve reconciliation and address historical issues have only limited and short-term effects. For the population, however, such actions will be perceived negatively and will lead to rejection of such attempts if they “[are] not followed up by compensation

measures or any other complex measures that would help address underlying inequalities” and are not substantiated by something of actual worth to both sides (Short 2012, 294). So to speak, backlash arises and complicates further attempts at reconciliation if any of the measures taken earlier were “in effect a smokescreen diverting attention away” from the fundamental problems (Short 2012, 297). A significant but rarely considered addition to the presented arguments is Tang’s conclusion that “when there is official silence, denial, and amnesia, there is no backlash – because there is no need for it” (2011, 717). Instead, the backlash happens and “comes to the forefront ... only when there is some official contrition”, which is perceived by the target audience as something contrariwise stifling the situation, misaddressing fundamental issues or seeking to realise only narrow and egoistic political interests (Tang 2011, 717). A final important puzzle for understanding the nature of backlash is that both at the domestic and international levels, the backlash around reconciliation usually occurs when “the reconciliation policies and systems were implemented without building sufficient consensus at home” (Chun 2019, 375). Thus, building such consensus through education and other memory vectors is necessary for reconciliation to happen and the backlash to be overcome.

## **Chapter 2. Contextualisation of the socio-political conflict between Ukraine and Poland**

### **2.1 Nationalist conflict in Galicia in the late 19th century**

The origins of the Ukrainian-Polish conflict are found in nationalist tensions and struggles between the Polish and Ukrainian people in late 19th-century Galicia (Hryniuk 1993, 123). They were exacerbated by “competing national aspirations, socio-economic disparities [of the two nations], and political manoeuvres inside the crumbling Austro-Hungarian Empire” (Andrusiak 1935, 166-167). To further their national goals, both sides established competing cultural and educational institutions, newspapers and political organisations (Drummond and Lubecki 2010). While Polish entities such as the National Democratic Party sought to fight Ukrainian influence and consolidate Polish dominance, the Ukrainian Prosvita (Enlightenment) Society, in turn, played a crucial role in promoting literacy and national consciousness among Ukrainians. Although the existence of such organisations had the potential to channel the nations’ contradictions into a constructive direction, both the Polish and Ukrainian sides used them to cultivate antagonism and mutual resentment (see further Magocsi 2002, 3-37). What is more important, despite sharing some common goals, such as the desire for greater autonomy, nationalist movements of Ukrainians and Poles were fundamentally opposed in their visions for the region’s future. Thus, the Polish nationalist movement sought to restore Polish independence stemming from this region, while the Ukrainian organisations aimed to assert their own distinct identity in Galicia and “establish a political situation without any Polish or Austrian dominance”, looking for initially significant socio-political autonomy and eventually independence (Hann and Magocsi 2005, 143).

Delving deeper, two more paramount issues that fueled the nationalist conflict between Ukrainians and Poles were language use and land ownership. Thus, educational institutions of



the Austrian-ruled Galicia became fundamental battlegrounds for nationalist sentiments since Polish and Ukrainian students fought over the representation of their cultures and their languages. For instance, Ukrainian students often heavily protested against the marginalisation of their language and culture in the Polish-dominated educational system (Fellerer 2003, 150-151; Ptashnyk 2011, 441-443). Regarding the land problem, the poverty and disempowerment of the Ukrainian peasantry starkly contrasted with the powerful estates held by the Polish nobles (Hryniuk 1993, 127-128). Sporadic efforts made in Vienna to redistribute land or grant more linguistic rights to Ukrainians to settle the conflict were, on the opposite, met with great resistance from the Poles, further deteriorating the ongoing situation. Furthermore, Austrian actions and policies ignited the conflict and tensions between Ukrainians and Poles not only because of the aforementioned Polish backlash against equalisation but also because the former frequently intentionally pitted one group against the other to retain power (Polonsky 1998). Economic policies reinforced social stratification and nationalist animosity by favouring Polish metropolitan centres over rural Ukrainian communities. Cultural agendas also conflicted, with Polish and Ukrainian efforts to raise national languages opposing imperial aspirations to promote the German language.

## **2.2 The Ukrainian-Polish war and the interbellum period**

The collapses of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires following WWI and the subsequent power vacuum in Eastern Europe set the stage for the Ukrainian-Polish War (Magocsi 2002; Golczewski 2012; Rapawy 2016). It lasted between November 1918 and July 1919 and resulted in better-equipped Polish forces defeating the newly independent West Ukrainian People's Republic and incorporating Galicia with a substantial Ukrainian population into Poland (Pavliuk 1998). This war became a crucial and turning episode not only for the broader struggle for control of Galicia but also for the Ukrainian-Polish conflict in general. This is so because the Poles deprived the Ukrainians of an independent state and the freedom

to which the nation had long aspired and became, from the point of view of the Ukrainians, occupants of Ukrainian lands. As a result, Ukrainians started to consider the outcome of this war as a crucial national tragedy that severely hurt the whole nation and perceive Poles as a hostile nation that inflicts irreparable suffering on Ukrainians (Zhurzhenko 2013).

Furthermore, tensions and sporadic violence between the Polish state and the Ukrainian minority in Galicia persisted during the interwar years (Simoncini 1994; Palko and Foster 2021). Ethnic tensions were heightened by the Polish assimilation programmes, which included prohibitions on the use of the Ukrainian language and culture, land reforms that disadvantaged Ukrainian peasants, and the relocation of Polish colonists into regions where Ukrainians predominated. Thus, the Ukrainian language was restricted in public and educational settings as part of Poland's stringent Polonization efforts intended to assimilate the Ukrainian community (Riabushkina 2017, 32-34). Another target was the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, which was seen as an essential pillar of the Ukrainian identity (Riabushkina 2017, 37-40). Moreover, rural Ukrainian communities were disrupted by Polish settlers receiving preferential treatment and land reforms that disproportionately harmed Ukrainian peasants (Hryniuk 1993, 124). All these developments reinforced Ukrainians' perception of Poles as a hostile and antagonistic nation and of the Polish state as a force that seeks to destroy their national identity. This, in turn, drastically exacerbated the conflict between the two nations.

As a response, the Ukrainian population created several nationalist organisations that were supposed to promote their national cause and defend their rights. However, some of them, like the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), ended up resorting to violent retribution, including sabotage and assassinations to undermine Polish authority and mobilise Ukrainian support (Rossoliński-Liebe 2023, 199-201). This, in turn, reinforced in the minds of the Polish people retaliatory beliefs that the Ukrainians were the enemy and a threat to their

longly-desired state and well-being of their nation that finally achieved self-rule. Finally, to stop such violence emanating from Ukrainian nationalists, the Polish state subjected the entire Ukrainian minority to significant repression, deprivation of rights and constant surveillance (Himka 1992, 399). Such responses, in turn, only further intensified Ukrainian opposition to Poles and intensified the inter-national conflict. So, these were the pillars that further amplified the conflict to the degree that these events are still reverberating among both nations.

## **2.3 World War II, the Volyn massacre and Operation Vistula**

The outbreak of WWII had profound implications for Polish-Ukrainian relations because it intensified ethnic hostilities, leading to tragic events such as the Volyn massacre and Operation Vistula. During the Nazi occupation of Poland and Ukraine, both Polish and Ukrainian nationalist groups sought to exploit the changing political landscape for the benefit of their own causes (Golczewski 2012; Rapawy 2016). In this regard, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), associated with the OUN, as a part of its programme, engaged in targeting the Polish population in Galicia and Volyn (Illytsky 2018, 43; Rossoliński-Liebe 2023, 203-204). Its activities reached the peak when the UPA attacked tens of thousands of civilian Poles in Volyn between 1943 and 1944, which resulted in the full-scale massacre (Rossoliński-Liebe 2023, 204-206). This was primarily driven by the goal of “ethnically purging the region in preparation for the creation of a future Ukrainian state” (Snyder 2003, 206). This massacre left the most crucial, non-negotiable and long-lasting scar on Polish-Ukrainian relations from the Polish perspective. Until today, for Poles, it has been the main factor preventing the two nations from achieving proper reconciliation and causing substantive backlash over any attempt to reconcile (Grytsenko 2021, 47-48).

However, that was not the end of the conflict, and in response to the Volyn massacre and the accompanying violence carried out by the UPA, after the end of WWII, the Polish

communist authorities implemented a series of retaliatory actions against the Ukrainian population (Lehmann 2009; Persak 2018). The most significant of them was Operation Vistula in 1947, which forcibly resettled hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians from southeastern Poland to the western and northern parts of the country, thereby dispersing the Ukrainian population and allegedly reducing the potential for further ethnic violence stemming from Ukrainian nationalists (Snyder 2003). Like the Volyn massacre for the Poles, this event became the most essential and fundamental national trauma for Ukrainians (see, for example, Kolomyichuk 2023). It, in turn, became the main obstacle to reconciliation from the Ukrainian understanding, and Poland's insufficient or incorrect handling of it has been causing significant backlash until today, further igniting the conflict between the two nations.

Thus, the Volyn massacre, Operation Vistula, and accompanying WWII events remain the central topic of a heated Ukrainian-Polish debate and confrontation. Thus, most Polish historians, such as Grzegorz Motyka, Władysław and Ewa Siemaszko, Władysław Filar and others, blame the nationalists from the OUN and UPA for the conflict between Poland and Ukraine that allegedly only started with the eviction of Poles from Volyn and Galicia (see further Motyka 2011; Siemaszko and Siemaszko 2008; Filar 2003). In turn, Ukrainian scholars, including Ivan Patryliak, Andrii Bolianovskiy and Ihor Iliushyn, primarily name the Polish authorities' discriminatory policies towards Ukrainians in the pre-war years that are still deliberately ignored by the Polish officials as the main reason for the contemporary conflict (see further Patryliak 2004; Bolianovskiy 2003; Iliushyn 2009). These examples show that even in academia, substantial disputes exist between scholars from both countries, which further prevents the possibility of achieving a mutually accepted understanding of history. However, this thesis argues that to reach reconciliation and finally overcome backlash, both sides must address past events and national traumas in a shared and mutually respective way.

## **Chapter 3. The empirical analysis of the backlash of reconciliation in Ukrainian-Polish relations**

### **3.1 First attempts at reconciliation between Ukraine and Poland in the 1990s**

After presenting a theoretical framework for understanding the backlash of reconciliation and providing historical contextualisation of the socio-political conflict between Ukraine and Poland, this thesis, by linking together the previous findings, will present an empirical analysis of how backlash of reconciliation has been occurring in the relations between the two countries since their independence. The third chapter will divide the analysis of the occurred backlash into decades, show what caused it, how it happened and answer whether the essence of backlash has changed over time in Ukraine-Poland relations. Yet, it must also be noted that the amount of available materials on this topic, both secondary academic works and primary sources showing the popular reactions and actions, especially for the decades of the 1990s and 2000s, is extremely limited. Therefore, this paper will, to some extent, be confined in its ability to carry out a deep analysis of the developments that took place but will make the best possible use of the available sources.

In 1992, as one of the first measures conducted at the inter-state level, Ukraine and Poland signed a Treaty of Good Neighbourliness, Friendly Relations and Cooperation. It was supposed to be a cornerstone for their future attempts to normalise relations and achieve reconciliation by emphasising the necessity for mutually beneficial, amicable and future-looking relations and proposing measures to achieve so (Treaty between the Republic of Poland and Ukraine ... 1992). Nevertheless, the public reaction of both nations to this treaty was sceptical and did not match the aspirations for reconciliation that state leaders had. Thus, although Poles recognised the necessity of signing a treaty with newly independent Ukraine,

the analysis of public opinion showed that at that time, the majority of the population had a predominantly negative or suspicious perception of independent Ukraine, recalling the numerous national traumas inflicted on the Polish people by Ukrainian nationalists fighting for independence, did not see how and why rapprochement with Ukraine could be useful and necessary for Poland, which was already striving for integration into the Western community and had a different political orientation, and was generally not interested in reconciliation with Ukraine (Osikowicz 2020, 45-49). In turn, Ukrainian public opinion, although not as categorically inclined, also did not see the possibility of reconciliation with Poland until it atoned for its historical guilt towards the Ukrainian people despite the far-reaching provisions of the treaty and perceived Poles as an antagonistic nation historically opposed to Ukrainian national aspirations, which also contradicted the text of the document (Osikowicz 2020, 117-121). While this was not a full-blown backlash yet, it did show in practice from the outset that, on a popular level, Ukrainians and Poles were not enthusiastic about the likely reconciliation.

The first crucial series of backlashes happened around the high-level visits by political leaders, such as the visit of Polish President Lech Wałęsa to Ukraine in 1993. These visits were supposed to further foster amicable bilateral relations and move closer to reconciliation based on the signing of the treaty, for which politicians from both countries aimed (Snyder 2003, 274). These visits always included symbolic acts of remembrance, mutual apologies for past grievances and joint statements by the state leaders on the closeness of the peoples of Poland and Ukraine and the desire to achieve full-fledged reconciliation (Terry 2000; Zięba 2002). However, the contradicting remembrance of WWII, particularly the Volyn massacre and Operation Vistula, which was not properly addressed during these state visits, emerged as a significant obstacle to reconciliation on a societal level and caused a huge backlash on the named high-level visits. In Poland, the backlash manifested itself in massive public protests that took place in many large cities against state actions aimed at reconciliation with a nation

that was still perceived as hostile (Portnov 2023, 68-71). In Ukraine, in turn, the first backlash did not assume such a critical form and was limited to occasional demonstrations and public disapproval of the government's actions communicated through the media (Kasianov 2022, 201-204). However, it should be noted that the less extensive scale of popular discontent in Ukraine was caused not so much by the public's acceptance of the government's actions on reconciliation, which, in fact, was not really accepted, but by the fact that at that time, Ukraine was mired in a serious economic crisis and the population was primarily dealing with other more pressing problems than opposing rapprochement with Poland.

Most importantly, these backlash developments were not confined to only some nationalistic groups but rather resonated across a wide swathe of the population since public opinion polls in both countries in the 1990s (see further CBOS 1997; KIIS 1997; Socis Omnibus 1999) showed mixed but mostly negative attitudes towards the opposite country and adverse feelings about possible reconciliation. Along the same lines, significant segments of both populations harboured deep-seated mistrust and resentment towards the other and were unwilling to let go of the national trauma inflicted on them. Furthermore, the media in both countries also played a crucial role in igniting the backlash because sensationalist and nationalist outlets were constantly exacerbating tensions between Ukrainians and Poles by presenting controversial historical issues in a one-sided and contradictory manner, deliberately provoking social conflict between the two nations around historical events and showing the opponent and his understanding of history in a negative light. For example, there were cases that became widely known in opposite countries when Ukrainian media openly presented Bandera and OUN as national heroes and noted that their actions against Poland were justified and deserved, or Polish media called the Ukrainian nation descendants of Nazis and equated layers of the Ukrainian population who disagreed with Polish positions on history with Nazis.

Understanding that their nations maintained the opposite and even clashing interpretations and remembrance of historical events and realising that this needs to be overcome to achieve successful inter-state relations, Presidents Kuchma and Kwaśniewski undertook another significant measure in 1997. They made a joint statement on the historical issues of WWII, the Volyn massacre and Operation Vistula (Joint Statement of the Presidents of Ukraine and the Republic of Poland ... 1997; see also RBC-Ukraine 1997; Nemenskii 2016), trying to show how exactly both nations can come to terms with their past and overcome previous national traumas and why it will be beneficial for both sides. However, both political circles and the overwhelming part of society in both Ukraine and especially Poland perceived this statement as incorrectly addressing the historical past and contradicting the countries' national interests for the sake of unclear prospects (Jędraszczyk 2018, 244). The main problems were that the declaration contained very soft language regarding the Volyn massacre and essentially equated it to the post-war Operation Vistula and attempted to shift responsibility for the mutual national traumas and tragedies of that time to outside actors. The latter is so because the declaration says, "we remember that sometimes the origins of these conflicts were beyond the borders of Ukraine and Poland and were caused by circumstances beyond the control of Ukrainians and Poles" (Joint Statement of the Presidents of Ukraine and the Republic of Poland ... 1997). This caused even more backlash from both sides and further pushed Poles and Ukrainians apart. If earlier protests against reconciliation were simply aimed against state actions in this direction, in this case, due to the fundamental rejection by both sides of the ideas and aspirations presented by their politicians in the statement, respectively, the anti-Polish and anti-Ukrainian public sentiments emerged in a widespread manner. More precisely, in Poland, a number of demonstrations and public events were held that presented the Ukrainian people as a hostile force, activists of Polish society destroyed dozens of memorial plaques and memorials dedicated to Ukrainians, which was widely supported by the public, and events



organised in various Polish cities by Ukrainian consulates and embassies were disrupted (see further Jędraszczyk 2018). Parallel to this, in Ukraine, extensive media and public campaigns aimed at demanding Poland to recognise the guilt for the centuries-old historical traumas inflicted emerged while the perception of Poland in a positive light and the welcoming of a possible reconciliation with it decreased even more, falling by two or three times compared to the first years of independent Ukraine (see further Jędraszczyk 2018). In other words, the first substantiated attempt to address the national traumas of both peoples at the elitist state level failed because instead of admitting what happened, accepting past wrongdoings by both sides and paving the way to overcome this, it aimed to shift the responsibility to the Soviet regime and all its wrong policies.

### **3.2 Persistence of bilateral conflict and contradictions in the 2000s**

Since the early 2000s, Ukrainian and Polish politicians, still striving to overcome the problems of the past and achieve effective cooperation in the present, have continued to attempt socio-political reconciliation, primarily in the context of the approaching 60th anniversary of the Volyn massacre. Thus, in July 2002, the same Presidents Kuchma and Kwaśniewski jointly opened the monument of the Ukrainian-Polish reconciliation, “Memory – Grief – Unity”, in Volyn and made a statement, declaring that the events in Volhynia were a crucial tragedy for both nations (Radio Svoboda 2003; Korrespondent UA 2003; see also Taraniuk 2013; Nemenskii 2016). From a political point of view, this step might have been sufficient to pave the way for the reconciliation and resolution of the conflict. However, on the social level, both the monument because it did not allow for the creation of a public understanding that the two nations might look at past events differently and the statement was perceived by Poles with extreme hostility and caused a serious backlash manifested in popular protests, further and more intense compared to the 1997-1998 events anti-Ukrainian manifestations and performances, presenting the Polish understanding of historical issues as the only one correct,

which Ukrainians must allegedly accept (Kasianov 2006; Jędraszczyk 2018). It was so because the Polish population perceived that statement and the opening of the monument in such discourse as an equation of the guilt of Ukrainians and Poles themselves for the violence that took place and the alleged lack of historical justice concerning the Polish people in the absence of any indication of guilt on the part of Ukrainians. At the same time, among Ukrainians, the monument opening and statement initially provoked a positive reaction because they perceived it as a fact that the Polish side recognised its part of the blame for the violence that took place and the subsequent Operation Vistula. However, the described reaction of Polish society, its neglect that Poles also committed violence against Ukrainians and its positioning of Poles as the only victimised party caused already a retaliatory backlash from Ukrainians that manifested itself in widespread anti-Polish discourse and campaigns in the leading national media, public protests not limited to major cities but primarily in Western and Central Ukraine and even numerous instances of discrimination against Poles as representatives of an allegedly hostile nation throughout the country by various segments of the population (Hrytsak 2004; Kasianov 2006). This further prevented the prospects of reconciliation between the two countries. Critically analysing why this happened, both populations were still unwilling to accept their dark pasts, were not ready to understand the opposite side and overcome past contradictions to move forward and perceived their own remembrance of the past as undoubtedly and unequivocally correct.

A year later, Kuchma and Kwaśniewski, trying to overcome the previously happened Polish backlash and fix their mistakes in reconciliation attempts, participated in joint commemorations of the Volyn Massacre, where Kuchma issued the first apology on the official level for the atrocities committed by the UPA against Poles (Radio Svoboda 2016). It was intended to foster mutual understanding and healing but essentially led to renewed debates and controversies in both countries, this time primarily in Ukraine. Ukrainian society, which had

already been experiencing a rise in nationalism and anti-Polish sentiments by that time, experienced a significant surge in anti-Polish rhetoric that presented Poles as a threat to their national cause and corresponding anti-Polish activities, events and even acts of remembrance (Marples 2006). Such response from Ukrainians was thus perceived in Poland as an ultimate downplaying of Polish suffering during WWII and led to retaliatory protests, causing further social and political backlash. Polish activists, for instance, engaged in the destruction of Ukrainian monuments throughout the country and anti-Ukrainian performances in public places (Kasianov 2006; Nemenskii 2016). The described events of 2003-2004 had the most extensive scope of backlash and thus hindered reconciliation efforts and reinforced divisive narratives even more. Analysing these events using the theoretical framework presented, above all, they provide further empirical evidence for Lind's theorisation that official apologies can conversely hinder reconciliation, in this case, by provoking backlash. In addition, the backlash continued to take place because both nations were experiencing heavy divisiveness over historical issues, were not morally and psychologically prepared to move beyond the traumatic past since they did not have the appropriate spaces for discussing and understanding this and did not see how reconciliation can be useful and necessary for the development and overcoming of the country's pressing problems.

Another notable episode of backlash in the 2000s was the opening of a memorial to the fallen Ukrainians who died at the hands of the Polish Armia Krajowa (AK) by the following presidents, Lech Kaczynski and Viktor Yushchenko, in 2006 (Ukrainska Pravda 2006). This was a joint continuation at the political level to overcome the conflict for a beneficial future, with the two presidents jointly declaring that "[w]e have chosen the path of mutual understanding ... [and] Ukraine and Poland are demonstrating a new policy of solidarity" (Ukrainska Pravda 2006). However, it provoked a similar backlash at the public level of both nations. Ukrainians it warily after previous happenings from the Polish side but still accepted

it as a way to overcome divisions and contradictions entrenched in history and reconcile historical traumas. This was so because this memorial, for the first time, tried to address the event that was previously neglected by politicians of both states and overshadowed by the Volyn massacre and Operation Vistula but still left huge scars on the Ukrainian nation (RuBaltic 2024). Among Poles, however, opinions were more obstructive as Polish society believed that as long as the events of the Volyn massacre were not properly addressed by Ukraine and Ukraine was not brought to its historical responsibility, the opening of such memorials was inappropriate (Nemenskii 2016). Public opinion research even shows that for many Poles, this event became the last straw of patience, after which they were convinced that reconciliation with Ukraine due to its allegedly egoistic treatment of the history and modern development of bilateral relations was impossible (see statistical data in Nemenskii 2016). Thus, it shows that unveiling memorials to past events does not necessarily lead to reconciliation if they are not able to properly address historical grievances. In this case, it was so because there was no appropriate political climate around this memorial, populations of the opposing countries still perceived their counterparts distrustfully and doubted their intentions and aspirations and political elites tried to address the problems of the common history of the two peoples in isolation from the population itself.

### **3.3 Problems and contradictions of relations in the 2010s and early 2020s**

In the 2010s, several substantial examples of backlash crucial for this thesis occurred. In 2013, the Polish Sejm started discussing an opportunity to attribute the term “genocide” to the Volyn massacre committed by Ukrainian nationalists, the fact of which would have seriously affected and deteriorated relations with Ukraine. The heated discussions took place between Polish liberals and conservatives, but eventually, the Sejm adopted a more cautious approach, recalling previous instances of the national backlash. It refused to declare July 11 as

the Day of Remembrance and, instead of the term genocide, approved the term “ethnic cleansing with elements of genocide” (Gazeta Prawna 2013). Despite this cautious approach, the backlash still happened on the level of both political elites and the general population. Polish conservators who had huge popular support accused the leader of liberals, Donald Tusk, of a lack of patriotism, ignorance of the national interests of Poles and even rewriting the history of the Polish nation (wPolityce 2014). The level of backlash significantly increased, resulting in the historical maximum level of Poles’ hatred towards Ukrainians after Tusk answered this accusation, saying that “[a]ccording to the UN resolution, Ukrainians may well call the Vistula operation genocide” (WP Wiadomości 2013). Even though he reasoned his argumentation, such comments were utterly unjustified in front of the Poles, given the usual popular reaction to reconciliation measures that were incorrect from the popular point of view.

After the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014, the situation in relations between Ukraine and Poland improved a bit since both states realised the need for political cooperation to counter the newly emerged Russian threat jointly. However, reconciliation actions the two countries took continued to cause a popular backlash as all the previously described issues causing backlash were still not addressed. This way, in 2016, based on the findings of the Polish Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) initiated by the conservatives, the Polish Sejm eventually recognised the events in Volyn as genocide of the Polish people (Nemenskii 2016). The IPN research and Sejm’s actions provoked sharp and massive political and social unrest within Polish society, leading to anti-Ukrainian actions in Poland (Gazeta Wyborcza 2016). In particular, the Ukrainian monuments throughout Poland were demolished by the Polish activists, and, between 2014 and 2017, 15 UPA monuments were destroyed because they allegedly ran counter to the national narratives of the Polish people, conveyed an incorrect picture of Ukrainian nationalists and their actions and were generally inconsistent with Polish collective memory (UNIAN 2017). Since the Polish law enforcement bodies did

not react to these monument destructions, such actions led to widespread retaliatory anti-Polish movements, protests and events among Ukrainians and became one of the key factors in the aggravation of socio-political confrontation (UNIAN 2017).

Another remarkable instance of popular backlash affecting the Ukraine-Poland reconciliation happened in July 2017, when a commemorative event was held in Warsaw on the occasion of the anniversary of the Volyn massacre. During it, leading Polish politicians, deputies of the Sejm and representatives of the civil society, advancing their own historical narratives and the remembrance approach, carried posters stating “Stop Bandera” and “Remember Volyn” and chanted that “[w]e remember the genocide – we will not let Bandera’s people live” (Ukrinform 2017). Some participants even wore armbands with the inscription “Polish Lviv” (Ukrinform 2017). Even though such actions and displays were in line with Polish understanding of the shared history with Ukraine and national traumas, it clearly showed how the Poles still neglected the necessity to understand the Ukrainian stances and different perceptions of historical grievances. Ukraine’s response to Polish actions was not long in coming. Ukrainian politicians soon noted that “[t]he Poles think that they have ‘restored justice’. In fact, they betrayed the Ukrainians ... [and] have fallen ill with chauvinism” (Military Review 2017). These stances resonated with the ordinary Ukrainian population, leading to a rise in anti-Polish sentiments and actions in the country’s major cities, a return to the perception of Poles as an antagonistic and malevolent nation and a re-emergence of doubts about the prospects of ever-achieving reconciliation unless Poles renounce their perception of history (Belavusau, Gliszczynska-Grabias and Mälksoo 2021). This example of another round of backlash through the application of the theoretical framework shows that the roots of the problems stemmed from both nations’ exploitation of nationalist sentiments rather than truth-telling, continued neglect of the need to accept and understand the existence of different views on historical traumas and the use of memory vectors in a consciously conflict-oriented rather

than conflict-solving direction. Thus, compared to the previous decades, some of the traditionally pressing causes of the backlash have not been resolved, but more significantly, new ones have emerged that were pushing the two nations away from reconciliation.

Finally, adopting controversial memory laws concerning the events of WWII in both countries became the latest important round of mutual backlash in the late 2010s-early 2020s. To be precise, in 2018, Poland passed amendments to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance, which made it a criminal offence to defame Poland's 'good name' and accuse it of committing crimes against other nations in the past, as well as consolidated anti-Ukrainian positions justifying the oppression of Ukrainians currently living in Poland having connected these current measures to the past actions of Ukrainian nationalists against Polish civilians in WWII (Soroka and Krawatzek 2019, 163). In turn, constantly amended until 2019, laws on decommunisation in Ukraine not only restricted freedom of speech for national minorities living in Ukraine but also explicitly honoured nationalist organisations and individuals who participated in the massacres of Poles as part of the Volyn Massacre and other attacks on civilians in the bordering regions of Ukraine and Poland (Koposov 2021, 274-276). These amendments were seen by both nations as attempts by their counterpart to solidify nationalistic and historically wrong narratives. Not surprisingly, adopting such amendments to laws, which is a misuse of such memory vectors, caused widespread popular protests on the streets, in the main traditional media and social media in both countries. Moreover, in response to these laws, nationalist groups in both countries staged demonstrations and ignited, respectively, anti-Polish or anti-Ukrainian sentiments (Rysicz-Szafraniec 2021), further polarising public opinion and pushing nations away from each other.

## **Chapter 4. Opportunities for overcoming the backlash and its significance in practice**

### **4.1 Measures to overcome backlash at the national levels of Ukraine and Poland**

The thesis will conclude the analysis of reconciliation and the corresponding backlash between Ukraine and Poland by explaining what currently lacking measures can be used by the countries to overcome this backlash and why it is essential in practice. The thesis starts with measures that should be taken at the national levels of the two countries but notes that to effectively overcome the backlash, all the measures presented here should be implemented together and not in isolation, including the later discussed measures in the interstate domain. Above all, in their own domestic domains, both countries separately should strive to achieve a consensus within their nations on the perception of their history and the traumatic past. Nowadays, in both countries, different segments of the nation depending on the political spectrum (conservative or liberal-minded in terms of history population), region of origin (Eastern or Western Ukraine, which had an incomparable level of interaction with the Poles, or conversely so-called “Regained Lands” of Poland or regions historically connected with Ukrainians) and even age group perceive their nation’s history and national traumas differently (see further Osipian and Osipian 2012; Liebich et al. 2018 for Ukraine and Lupion 2017 for Poland). In such realities, when it comes to historical issues, there is no unified society within either Ukraine or Poland; instead, there are many sub-communities that have different views on history and react differently to attempts to address it. Because of this, as seen in Chapter three, depending on the developments, the reconciliation backlash has been provoked by different sections of society holding different historical positions. Therefore, this thesis argues that to overcome the described backlash cycles, both countries must first endeavour to reach a



consensus within their nation regarding historical issues. Without overcoming this divisiveness, backlash will inevitably continue to occur (Rigney 2012, 252; Chun 2019, 388).

Reaching a consensus on historical issues and traumas even within one nation if it is divided and polarised enough, which is still the case both for Ukraine and Poland, will be indeed challenging, as the practical cases of consensus building within Japan or South Korea, for example, confirm (see Takekawa 2015 for Japan and Park 2020 for South Korea). Nevertheless, Shiping Tang addressed precisely this problem and argued, among other things, that within one nation, such a consensus can be achieved if proper efforts are made, and to do so, it is primarily necessary to utilise the resources of the educational system and conduct media campaigns (see further 2011, 740). Connecting these findings to the considered case and furthering them, this thesis asserts that this is highly relevant for Ukraine and Poland. The problem in both countries, however, is that, at the moment, their education systems do not adequately address the issue of historical memory and thus lay the foundations for dissensus within the respective societies rather than consensus, while the national media further create such negative polarisation (Studenna-Skrucka 2021, 99-101; Moskwa 2021, 155-156). At the same time, this issue should be addressed by both Ukraine and Poland with caution and not allow the rewriting of history under the guise of consensus building. However, it is necessary to make an immediate reservation that due to strong contradictions between Ukraine and Poland on the inter-societal level, a consensus on the history between the countries is unlikely to be reached. Thus, the next section will describe how, instead of a consensus on the inter-state level, the two nations should develop an understanding and acceptance that their opponent sees and will continue to see history differently.

However, apart from the fact that such a consensus at home will be challenging to achieve, consensus alone will not suffice. The thesis argues that an important task for Ukraine

and Poland at the domestic level in terms of working on history, together with the pursuit of public consensus, should also be addressing and recognising the dark sides of the own past. To pave the way for reconciliation and prevent the return of the backlash, both countries must assist their peoples in becoming aware of their dark legacies and create appropriate mechanisms or platforms through which such popular understanding can be achieved (Grytsenko 2021). In parallel with making the people aware of their dark legacies, they will be made aware that the other side has its own views of history and the different feelings that come from it, which is also essential to moving forward (Bull and Cacciatori 2020). Moreover, in this regard, states need to ensure that those who speak out and draw the attention of the general public to the dark pasts of their own history can do so freely and are not then persecuted by the state or society itself because of it. This element of freedom of expression about one's dark past is an important pillar on the road to overcoming the backlash. In turn, achieving awareness of one's own people about own dark legacies can be achieved through greater work in the field of history education, for example, by creating educational materials that recognise one's own dark legacies rather than blaming the opponent and denying that the nation itself has done anything wrong, by promoting such knowledge through the media, including social media, which will help to attract the attention of the younger generation and also through the activities of the institute of national memory, discussed elsewhere in this thesis.

In addition, although this measure may seem contradictory at first glance, this paper advocates that to avoid a reconciliation backlash, Ukraine and Poland should have the same or at least similar foreign policy aspirations and practices. More specifically, in the case in question, the Poles' backlash against reconciliation attempts can be overcome when they are fully convinced that Ukraine has irrevocably embarked on a course of Westernisation and Euro-Atlantic integration and thus understand that they will henceforth share political convictions with the Ukrainians and will not doubt their intentions and aspirations. The importance of this

in theoretical terms was discussed in Chapter one, and case studies support such conclusions. For instance, in the case of Poland and Germany, the backlash in German society around possible reconciliation effectively and in quick time ceased after Poland's political course after the collapse of the Soviet bloc turned out to be in line with that of an already united West-centred Germany (Nasalska 2000, 56). Also, in a similar case to Ukraine and Poland, Japan and South Korea saw a decline in backlash and increased reconciliation when, with the return of geopolitical confrontation in the 2010s, their populations realised that their national political aspirations were on one side of the spectrum against the actions of China, North Korea and partly Russia in their region (Wu and Yang 2016, 656). Similarly, between Ukraine and Poland, the level and scope of backlash have been on a downward trend since the late 2010s, when Ukraine clearly embarked on the Euro-Atlantic course that Poland had long been on, and Poles realised that they could try to build trust with Ukraine despite the backlash in the previous decades when Ukraine was still perceived as a country with an opposite Euro-Asian/post-Soviet orientation with which trust would be difficult to build (Grytsenko 2021, 41-42; Portnov 2021, 23-25). However, the full effect has not yet been achieved, so to overcome the backlash, Ukraine, which has embarked on a Western development path, needs to confirm this more often and more clearly in front of Poles, which has been the case since the Russian invasion.

Furthermore, to overcome the backlash of reconciliation, countries in their domestic arenas must create free spaces for discussing historical memory and a suitable political environment for truth-seeking. One might say, based on the previous argument, that Ukraine and Poland should then have achieved reconciliation while both were part of the Soviet bloc, which, in fact, did not happen. Acknowledging this, this thesis goes further and argues that this is so because, in the realities of socialist systems, Ukrainians and Poles did not have the opportunity to properly and freely express their views on the problems of the historical past, which is necessary to overcome the backlash. Instead, the existing system that forbade

discussion of historical inter-national traumas laid a huge foundation for backlash between Ukrainians and Poles (see further Bilinsky 1994). The presence of an opportunity for open expression on inter-national relations and a suitable political environment would prepare Ukrainians and Poles morally and psychologically to move beyond past national grievances and traumas (Grytsenko 2021, 47), the significance of which on a theoretical level was discussed in Chapter one. In turn, to create such a political environment, as Ann Rigney noted, Ukraine and Poland can utilise different vectors of memory and especially “performative [and] ... less-codified forms of commemoration that sometimes operate in conjunction, sometimes in tension, with legal procedures” launched by state actors (2012, 251). At the same time, given that for both Ukraine and Poland, museums and memorials are key vectors of remembrance concerning bilateral relations (Kozlova 2023, 251; see also Verbytska and Kuzmyn 2019), it is through their use that both countries can create psychological and moral readiness among their populations to overcome past national traumas in their domestic arenas.

On a similar note, to overcome the emergence of backlash in the domestic arena, both Ukraine and Poland should ensure that the memory vectors they have and use cease to be sites for the clash around historical and political developments and national traumas, the theoretical importance of which was also discussed in the first chapter. The most striking example of a memory vector becoming a site of clash, causing a massive and fundamental backlash and preventing reconciliation between countries, is the Yasukuni Shrine in Japan (Mochizuki 2010, 36). In Ukraine and Poland, though, most monuments and memorials, museums and expositions and even activities of national memory institutes are likewise places for clashes that cause backlash (see Stryjek and Konieczna-Sałamatin 2021). The most promising option for both countries to overcome this is to create unambiguous, historically accurate and acceptable by the opponent narratives around such memory vectors in the domestic arena and, through this, also educate their populations and lay the foundations for their rapprochement

with the other side. Another mechanism to overcome or prevent backlash at the national level for Ukraine and Poland is to use reconciliation with the other country to effectively address relevant and pressing societal issues. In other words, to prevent backlash, reconciliation measures with the opposite country should not overshadow or distract attention from the pressing and immediate problems of the country at the moment but rather link reconciliation to the possibility of solving them and show its population how the implementation of reconciliation will benefit it (see Bar-Tal 2009). In the case of Ukraine and Poland, the most relevant scenario now would be to link the benefits of reconciliation with mitigating a security threat to both Ukrainians and Poles from Russia by strengthening mutual ties and mutual action in the face of such a threat.

Finally, the thesis also argues that to overcome backlash at the national level, Ukraine and Poland must take comprehensive measures to suppress and mitigate nationalism in their countries. Although this issue is rarely considered in the context of the essence and manifestation of backlash, empirical examples, such as the case of Japan and China (Wu and Yang 2016, 656) or Poland and Russia (Zięba 2023, 104), show the importance of this issue in two opposite ways. On the one hand, if nationalism grows in a country's society, people will become much more sensitive to the attitude towards the past and the current actions of the opposite country, which will cause more frequent and deeper discontent with reconciliation attempts, resulting in backlash. On the other, if society becomes more nationalistic, it will be less willing to forgive historical traumas and past violence committed by the other country and will increasingly oppose the reconciliation actions of its own government, which will also result in backlash. The analysis in empirical Chapter three shows that, unfortunately, the growth of nationalism is a case for both countries in question and Poland in particular, which is the reason for such a frequent, widespread and repetitive backlash. Regarding how exactly Ukraine and Poland can prevent the growth of nationalism, especially in the context of

historical problems, the most promising opportunity would be the effective and conducive use of national institutes of memory. An analysis of the essence of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) in Poland and its counterpart entity, the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (UINM), shows that both of them have as one of their main goals the counteraction against history-driven nationalism in their countries (see Faraldo 2021). Therefore, a greater investment in them and a greater emphasis on them when dealing with historical problems at home can help to counter such a rise of nationalism in both societies and thus overcome the mutual backlash.

## **4.2 Inter-state interactions to overcome backlash and achieve reconciliation**

Turning to the domain of inter-state interaction, which is just as important, if not more so, for overcoming the backlash of reconciliation, several primary areas of action can help achieve this task. Above all, as emphasised in the last section, both nations need to jointly come to an understanding and, most importantly, acceptance that there are different perspectives on historical developments, problems and traumas and that their perception of the former is not the only correct one. To overcome the return of backlash and to be able to move forward positively from past national traumas and grievances, Ukrainians and Poles need to understand the point of view of the opposite side and comprehend why the perception of past events in one or another existing form is essential for their counterpart and cannot be changed so easily. Both sides should not deny that their opponent has its own perception of history, but this does not mean that either nation should abandon its own perceptions of historical tragedies and forget its history. Instead, the peaceful co-existence of different stances on history as something that may contradict one another to a certain extent but at the same time co-exist should be achieved. Borrowing this term from Anna Bull, the thesis calls this desired situation between Ukrainians and Poles “agonistic memory”, which could be basically understood as applying and adopting

the concept of “agonistic peace” to the discipline of memory politics and the matter of reconciliation (see discussions on “agonistic memory” in Bull and Hansen 2015; Bull and Cacciatori 2020; Bull, Hansen and Colom-González 2021). Currently, the fundamental problem, though, is that both nations still believe that their view of history is the only correct one, and the other side is obliged to accept it.

Moving from theoretical considerations to the possibility of practical action, Ukraine and Poland have several key tools to achieve this. Above all, these are the institutes of national memory of the two countries, between which there are established ties, frequent cooperation to address the problems of the past and, most importantly, joint public activities aimed at both societies together in the form of organising joint commemorations and remembrance events, informing the general public about archival findings about their common history and cooperating on conducting work on the history of Ukrainians in Poland and Poles in Ukraine (Wojnar 2021, 74). In view of this and the fact that in recent years, they have received increased commitment and funding from their governments, they can become the main platforms through which the understanding of the importance of achieving a peaceful co-existence of different views on the history of the two peoples can be communicated to the public. Another opportunity to achieve this would be the work on the development of joint history textbooks and other historically oriented educational material aimed at a wide range of audiences, the need for which was noted in the previous section. These materials, if successfully implemented, could promote an understanding of shared history that takes into account the presence of different views of the two nations on the most pressing events of the past, prepare both nations to accept the peaceful co-existence of different perspectives on history and show both nations why it is important to accept and understand the positions of the other side in order to move forward in a mutually favourable and beneficial way (see further Pingel 2008; Lässig 2009). In other words, they will help Ukrainians and Poles achieve the condition of “agonistic memory”

Finally, another promising course of action in this regard is the creation of joint monuments and memorials that, by addressing the problems of the past, will promote narratives about the possibility of co-existence of different perceptions of the events of the common past (Buckley-Zistel and Schäfer 2014; Frith 2015). The problem nowadays, as seen in Chapter three, is that the current monuments, even if opened jointly, do not aim to achieve such a goal and, vice versa, often seek to deny other perceptions of history, which is exactly what causes the popular backlash.

Another fundamental measure to overcome the backlash of the Ukrainian and Polish populations in the interstate domain is the need for countries to accompany their symbolic gestures with practically meaningful actions that will be of value to the opposing nation. The way in which the absence of this logically leads to people's backlash on a theoretical level is discussed in the first chapter. Analysing empirical situations, in 1970, German Chancellor Brandt, while in Poland, fell on his knees in front of a monument to the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and after that, the backlash for at least superficial reconciliation on the part of Poles that had persisted in the decades before started to gradually decline (see Phillips 2001). In 2016, in precisely the same way, Ukrainian President Poroshenko knelt in front of the monument to the victims of the Volyn massacre, but in this case, Poles, after a while, expressed even greater dissatisfaction with Ukraine's actions and perceived Ukrainian policy towards the memory of the past as unacceptable (Soroka 2022, 342-343), which only increased the backlash. The critical difference showing how to avoid backlash and achieve reconciliation is that in the German case, the symbolic gesture towards the Poles by Brandt was accompanied by significant, from the Polish stances, practical actions such as the signing of a treaty on the recognition of post-war borders and the establishment of common historical research committees to assess German guilt (Wu and Yang 2016, 653) while in the Ukrainian case, no actions were taken that could have cemented Ukraine's position as a partner seeking to



overcome the problems of the past. Therefore, for Ukraine to avoid a Polish popular backlash, it is necessary to combine symbolic gestures with some practical actions that would confirm a genuine and not just verbal interest in reconciliation. At the same time, the thesis argues that Ukrainians will naturally expect similar practically valuable and significant measures from Poland, as only a unilateral action in this direction will, on the contrary, cause a backlash in the country that first took some practical reconciliation-oriented actions. The example of Brandt's kneeling empirically illustrates this because after his actions, the backlash on the part of Poles indeed decreased but, on the opposite, drastically rose within the German society because Poland did not respond with any similar actions aimed at reconciliation (Wu and Yang 2016, 653). Because of this, which may be more difficult but also achievable, the two countries will also need to coordinate their symbolic gestures and practically significant actions to avoid backlash both at home and in the opponent's society.

Finally, this thesis argues that another key opportunity for Ukraine and Poland to overcome backlash is to make their joint actions politically and legally transparent. Thus, the countries should explain more to the population of the opposite country the nature and direction of their actions and how they are aimed at sincere reconciliation (Chun 2019, 386), as well as conduct legal actions regarding the treatment of past events not in a closed mode as it happens now, especially in Poland, but in a relatively public one. In this way, the population of the opposite country will better understand the thinking and reasoning regarding addressing the joint past of their opponent and will be less afraid of the obscurity and secrecy of what their opponent is doing, thus reducing the prospects of backlash. Moreover, such actions will also help countries to gain greater acceptance of themselves as promising and reliable partners for the future rather than current opponents in the eyes of the opposite society (see discussion in Szpak and Bunikowski 2022). On a final note, to prevent or overcome backlash, Ukraine and Poland should jointly involve more actors beyond the state in the reconciliation process

(Rigney 2012, 253). This would help societies gain greater confidence in the favourable intentions of the opposing state, create a more robust system of interconnections necessary to leave no room for backlash and generally create greater acceptance on the part of both nations of moving forward past national traumas.

## Conclusion

Summing up, the thesis has addressed the problem of reconciliation of the conflict between Ukraine and Poland. It has shown that although on a superficial examination, the two countries may appear to enjoy cooperative and positive relations, in reality, the interaction between them is permeated by a multi-layered confrontation. Despite several attempts by state leaders to achieve interstate reconciliation and even a common threat perception in the form of Russia, reconciliation has not yet been achieved. In this regard, the thesis argues that the main reason for this is the public reciprocal backlash against political attempts to achieve reconciliation, which moreover represents not isolated cases but constant cycles of reciprocal backlash. This backlash is primarily related to the two nations' conflicting understandings of their shared history, unwillingness to overcome past national traumas and lack of understanding that the opposing nation has its own views and feelings about history that cannot be changed.

The first chapter has created its own in-depth analytical framework to better account for the concepts of reconciliation and backlash. It has achieved this by advancing, improving and critically re-evaluating existing academic findings. In particular, regarding reconciliation, this thesis has argued for adopting a broader understanding, highlighting that reconciliation primarily takes place at the level of societies and not so much states, occurs at the psychological level of people and depends not only on the inter-state but, most importantly, the intra-state domain. Concerning backlash, the presented framework has noted that it is a natural phenomenon when addressing historical problems, arises because the actual approaches to reconciliation favour "thin coexistence" instead of "thick integration" and attempts at reconciliation usually have only partial and short-term intentions.

The second chapter has analysed the main historical episodes of the socio-political conflict between Ukraine and Poland and examined the national traumas that the two nations

have inflicted on each other. The origins of the underlying problems and contradictions can be traced back to late 19th-century Austrian-ruled Galicia, which witnessed a nationalist conflict between Ukrainians and Poles over the right to exist in the region. The conflict continued through the interbellum period, when war broke out between Ukrainians and Poles, as a result of which significant Ukrainian territories became part of the newly formed Polish state, and the remaining Ukrainians experienced drastic Polonisation. However, the key and still irreparable problem of inter-ethnic interaction that impedes reconciliation is the events of World War II and the first post-war years, which marked the mutual killing of civilians by Ukrainian nationalists and the Polish insurgent army, the ethnic cleansing of Polish civilians by Ukrainian nationalists and the subsequent forced resettlement of large numbers of Ukrainians by the Polish socialist regime.

The third chapter has critically assessed the main episodes of popular backlash against state attempts at reconciliation and suggested what were the main reasons for this, aligning with the theoretical framework presented in the first chapter. Thus, in the 1990s and 2000s, the main reasons for the backlash were the distrust of both peoples towards each other, the ignorant promotion of their own views of history and the refusal to accept that the opposing side might have a different vision of history, the inability of both societies to understand each other and the inconsistency of people's views on a possible reconciliation with the aspirations of their politicians. The 2000s also witnessed a rise in nationalism in both societies, which was linked, among other things, to the incorrect, from the societies' point of view, addressing of the common past by political elites and the intensification of controversy around history issues due to the lack of acceptance of the way history issues were addressed in the opposing society. In the 2010s, the level of backlash has not decreased despite the emergence of a common threat and, retaining all the problems causing backlash from previous decades, also witnessed the deliberate actions of certain population segments against reconciliation.

Finally, the fourth chapter has empirically suggested how the backlash between Ukraine and Poland can be overcome in practice. Thus, in the domestic arenas, both countries should strive for a national consensus on history, help populations become aware of the dark legacies of their own history, have similar political aspirations, avoid turning existing vectors of memory into sites of clash, direct the achievement of reconciliation towards addressing pressing societal issues and prevent the reinforcement of nationalism. In turn, in the inter-state domain, both countries should ensure that both nations understand that their opponent will see history differently but that peaceful coexistence of different perspectives on history is possible, confirm their symbolic gestures and talk about the desire for reconciliation with practically meaningful actions, create opportunities for free inter-national discussion of history and the corresponding political climate, make their joint actions politically and legally transparent and involve more non-state actors in the process of reconciliation.

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