The Ukraine crisis: a Russian–European cold war?

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Perspective

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The Ukraine crisis: a Russian–European cold war?

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Abstract

This article analyses the historical context of the crisis. It considers the relations in the triangle Russia–Ukraine–West against the background of the Ukrainian events during and after Maidan, as well as the reunification/annexation of Crimea with/by Russia. In Ukraine this has largely been seen as a conquest, but in Crimea itself (and Russia) significant majorities regard it as a successful outcome. It analyses the major factors in this conflict, as well as offering a recommendation for its possible resolution. The "shared cradle" of Ukraine and Russia is considered, including the establishment of the Orthodox Church, whose first seat was at Kiev and whose patriarchate was eventually established at Moscow. The important role of this church — as well as that of those which have recently broken away — is also examined with respect to the conflict. The fratricidal policies of the imperial centre in the early Soviet period, the devastations of the Second World War, and the tensions of the post-Soviet period are also analysed, not least with respect to the legacy they have left. The conclusions consider what is going on in Ukraine and Crimea today and what means are being implemented by the various factions with respect to their future.

Introduction

Russia and the West became increasingly estranged from one another even before the events of Maidan. Each saw their interests in the region infringed with the object of their interest led off into the sphere of the other, and each became more radical and reckless in the methods adopted to prevent the other from winning out. Yet the reality is far more complex and, on the international stage, this confrontation has had and continues to have far more harmful consequences for millions of people than merely a new cold war squabble. Indeed, it has already led to the death of over 8,000 people in Ukraine, as officially counted, the most dramatic deterioration of Russian–European relations and tensions with Euro-Atlantic community since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The situation did not improve with the ongoing sanctions imposed on Moscow, growing militancy within Russia, mobilisation in Ukraine and resumption of firepower in the east of the country. For many, this leaves few doubts that the world may be sleepwalking not merely into a new cold war but another hot war.

The goal and structure of this article is three-fold. Firstly, it will present the historical context of the crisis. Secondly, it will consider relations in the triangle Russia–Ukraine–West and the events preceding the Ukrainian upheavals. Thirdly, it will analyse major factors in the current conflict. In the conclusion, it will present some recommendations for potential conflict-resolution measures.
Historical context

The first European Union (EU) High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana once stressed that the major difference between Europe and the US rests in that when Americans say “that’s history” they usually mean that the subject being considered is irrelevant. In contrast, he argues: “When Europeans say ‘that is history,’ they usually mean the opposite.”¹ This saying is even more valid if one analyses Russian–Ukrainian relations. And yet, the truth is that few outside the regions involved know the answer, and certainly not in the EU and the wider West. As Professor Christopher Andrew has frequently put it, “many people today are suffering from Historical Attention Span Deficit Disorder (HASDD).”² That is, they do not understand the historical context and therefore are shocked when their interferences in the affairs of other countries do not produce the outcome they expected. HASDD has been around for years, but is now more alive and well in the increasingly fragmented EU than ever before. So what is the historical background and how it is relevant?

Shared cradle

The shared history of the two countries can be traced millennium back to the medieval period. In the early ninth century AD, the medieval principality Kievan Rus was the first state established by eastern Slavic tribes. In 988, the Grand Prince Vladimir of Kiev had brought Rus into the fold of Byzantine Christianity, at Chersonesus in Crimea. So Kiev remained the first spiritual and political heartland of Rus. It was the centre of transit routes from northern to southern Europe until destroyed by the Tartar invasion in the 13th century. Although Kiev never regained its autonomous power until the late 20th century, the memory of it having been the cradle of the eastern Slavic civilisation has become an important element of historical legitimacy for both Ukraine and Russia.

With the collapse of centralised Kievan power, western parts of the eastern Slavic lands, namely western Ukraine and Belarus, fell under the control of the expanding Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and evolved as a part of the western European tradition with the local nobility adopting Catholicism in part in order to maintain its wealth and its important role in the politics of the Polish–Lithuanian state. This co-existence was not always smooth and on equal terms. Sometimes the Ukrainian nobility was deprived of its estates or privileges. Many of them then moved to the east of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and served as frontier defenders to obtain not only greater autonomy but land. In this way, the Ukrainian Cossacks appeared, who establish the first Ukrainian military republic, the Zaporizhs’ka Sich (Host), on the island of Khortytsia in the River Dnieper, just to the north of Crimea. This tradition helped to shape the Ukrainian concept of their nation as a military-based direct democracy.

South-west anarchy and north-east autocracy

The north-east of the Slavic lands was subdued under the Tatars for some 200 years. Eventually, during the 14th–16th centuries, the Grand-duchy of Moscow was increasingly able to repel the attempts of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth to expand, whilst overthrowing the Tartars in 1480, and to subordinate other Slavic city-states. Grand-duke Basil of Moscovy refused to accept the reunion of Orthodoxy with Roman Catholicism, as the Council of Florence had decreed. The marriage of Ivan with the Byzantine Princess Sophia, niece of the last Byzantine Emperor — whose empire had fallen to the Ottomans in 1453 — further strengthened his hand, giving him some justification for now calling Moscow the Third Rome. Henceforth, he took the title Tsar, that is, Caesar in Russian. This reinforced the growing autonomy of the Russian Church, which eventually obtained independence from the Patriarch of Constantinople. Italian architects were now imported

to strengthen this claim through architectural and pictorial symbolism. Territorial expansion strengthened the trend to an authoritarian centralised state. Two major republican cities — Pskov and Novgorod — were conquered by Moscow. This trend reached its peak under Ivan the Terrible (1530–1584), grandson of Basil the Great, who expanded the control of Moscow over Smolensk (1514) and Riazan (1517).

Having consolidated its domination over these principalities, Moscovy had come to the stage when its interests and security came to clash with virtually all of its neighbours, Sweden, the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in the west, and the Khanate of Crimea in the south. Invasions by the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and the fight with Sweden over the Baltic coast, their alliance with some members of the Russian nobility, and attempts to impose their protégé on the Muscovite throne led to a strengthening of autocratic trends in the politics of Moscovy. These episodes concluded with the chaotic period known as the Time of Troubles. In this period, internal conflict went hand in hand with foreign invasion. These disruptive episodes have become important element of Russian identity, even in our own time, in 2004–2012, as will be described below. With respect to the Tatars, it was the former, the millions of sought-after Slavic slaves (the word slave derives from the term Slav), which was the chief source of wealth for the Crimean Tatars for over two centuries. Then, during the later 17th and early 18th centuries, Crimea suffered a period of decline.

It should be noted that the Ukrainian Cossacks were often — but not always — allies of Russia. Nonetheless, their military activities against the Crimean Tatars along the northern Black Sea coast did not always comply with Russia’s imperial strategy, as these military activities might have provoked a military conflict with the Ottoman Empire. This tension in the alliance between what had now become the expanding Russian Empire and the Ukrainian Cossacks revealed itself on numerous occasions in the 17th and 18th century. For example, this occurred when the conflict between the Ukrainian gentry and Polish nobility erupted into open war in 1648, Russia eventually agreed to support the Ukrainians in their quest for their own autonomy, at cost of the incorporation of Ukrainian lands into the Russian Empire. The Cossacks swore an oath of loyalty to the Russian Tsar and he, in turn, promised to respect Cossacks liberties as confirmed in special agreements signed at Pereyaslav in 1654. Although some Russian troops continued to fight the Poles, many Ukrainians were disappointed that Russia signed a peace treaty in 1667, at Andrusovo with the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, thereby ceding significant parts of their Ukrainian lands to them. This theme of betrayal would plague Russian–Ukrainian relations up to the present day.

Moscow’s “perfidy” and Kiev’s “betrayal”

Tension grew as the Russian Empire expanded and introduced yet further autocratic practices into Ukraine. Many Cossacks perceived Moscow as failing to respect the agreement, abolishing various Cossack liberties and, some maintained, capturing a number of their fellows. The growing tension resulted in an open conflict during the reign of Tsar Peter the Great. Peter claimed his title, founding his new majestic capital St Petersburg on what had been Swedish Ingermansland, thereby providing his vast empire with a Baltic port and maritime gateway to the West. In the national Ukrainian consciousness, the perception has formed since the late 19th century, that thousands of Ukrainian Cossacks had died whilst performing unskilled manual labour in the Baltic wetlands to accomplish this task.

Driven by his interest to strengthen the Russian presence in the Baltic, Peter established a modern fleet with skilled naval personnel from Britain, Holland, and other western European countries. His continental army was also modernised. The stage was now set for the final fight between Russia and Sweden for supremacy in the Baltic. However, in this fight against Sweden, the Tsar did not take into account the interests of his Ukrainian subject. According to peace treaties of that period with the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Ukrainian lands were to be liberated by Cossacks who would then return them to Commonwealth sovereignty. The presence of Russian
troops in Ukraine and their exploitation of the Ukrainian lands had been a thorn in the flesh of the local population and resulted in growing resentment amongst members of the Cossack leadership. Peter also intended to transform Cossack regiments into ordinary dragoon ones. The reason for this policy was to improve the efficiency of the Cossacks who were used to fighting the quick-manoeuvring Tatars and Turks but had been unable to put up solid resistance against the Swedish line infantry. The politically experienced Ukrainian Hetman (leader of the Ukrainian Cossacks) Mazepa was perfectly aware that this transformation would undermine Cossack autonomy and lead to Russia’s successful subjugation of Ukraine.

As a result of this, despite his previously cordial relations with Peter, the Hetman turned away from Russia to support Sweden, by commencing his march on Moscow, thereby incurring Russia’s wrath (how this echoes today!). He then turned south, however, leaving Peter to consolidate his win at Poltava. (This would become the subject of Mazepa, a famous opera by Tchaikovsky.) With Sweden repelled, the Ottomans came to the aid of their Swedish allies and attacked once again, supported by the Swedish king Karl XII who had sought refuge in Ottoman Bender, today in the heart of Russian–supported Transnistria, in eastern Moldova. Peter had to bear the humiliation of losing Azov, confirmed by the Treaty of the Pruth (21 July 1711), once Russian forces there had been surrounded. The fact that Russia did not manage to consolidate its positions on the Black Sea coast resulted in a further continuation of Russian–Turkish wars and conflict in Ukraine.

The next wave of Russia’s successful expansion to the south came during the reign of the Empress Catherine the Great. This successful monarch had succeeded in wooing the then ruler of Crimea, Giray Khan — who had spent some time at her court in St Petersburg — into inviting the Russians to assume sovereignty. This he did to keep his rivals at bay, in particular, the Ottoman Turks. Having a formal invitation from the Crimean ruler, the Russian army entered the peninsula and suppressed any resistance. To secure its rule over Crimea, the Russian Empire relied on the local Tatar nobility. Although local peasants were largely discontented and massively migrated from the peninsula, the Tatar nobles were confirmed in possession of their ancestral lands and were given Russian patents of nobility. Islam was treated with certain degree of religious toleration. Henceforth, Russian hegemony in Ukraine and Crimea grew, and in 1783 Crimea was officially annexed by Russia. Only a few years before, Catherine the Great had carried out the destruction, in 1775, of the Ukrainian Cossacks at Zaporizhia. Some Ukrainian Cossack leaders were subsumed into the Russian nobility and became loyal officers of the Empire. As a result of these episodes, mutual accusations of disloyalty and betrayal became a major theme in Russian–Ukrainian relations.

Fratricide under the Soviet regime

The theme of betrayal remained quite vocal in the history of Russian–Ukrainian relations. After the end of the Great War and Bolshevik Revolution, Ukrainian intellectuals proclaimed the Ukrainian People’s Republic in 1917. Although initially the Bolsheviks’ Congresses welcomed the All-Ukrainian peasant and soldier assemblies held in Kiev and the Ukrainian government delegation during the negotiation in Brest-Litovsk, they eventually changed their policy and invaded Ukraine. The country was effectively divided as a settlement after the Russian–Polish war. Then further terrors of the early Soviet period followed, with a deliberately inflicted famine, the Holodomor, in which millions starved throughout Ukraine.

The Molotov–Ribbentrop pact of 1939 led to the reunification of ethnic Ukrainian lands under the Soviet umbrella, and many western Ukrainians, who spend the inter-war period under the somewhat autocratic rule of Polish leader Pilsudsky, warmly welcomed the arrival of the Soviet army. Their hopes were, however, disappointed with the arrival of brutal collectivisation and Soviet repressions. As a result of this outrage, the Ukrainian nationalist movement did not hesitate to ally with Nazi Germany in the hope that it would facilitate the creation of an independent Ukrainian state. It should be noted that the Ukrainian nationalist movement was extremely broad with some of its leaders subscribing to a far right ideology, while others maintained more centrist positions. Some of the units of Ukrainian Insurgent Army took part in mass murder and ethnic
cleansing, whilst others comprised Russian and Jewish units\(^3\) and fought against both the Red Army and German troops. Controversial in its origin and activities, the question of the Ukrainian nationalist movement became ever more divisive when Russia and Ukraine tried to construct their post-Soviet identities.

During the Second World War, Crimea was occupied by the Nazis, who left a trail of massacre and ethnic cleansing in their wake, whilst Ukraine itself, devastated by a war between the Soviets, on the one hand, and the Germans supported by some members of the Crimean Tatar community,\(^4\) on the other, endured one of the worst periods in its long fought-over history. Then, in 1954, the Russian leadership first under Malenkov and then with the support of Premier Nikita Khrushchev, himself a Ukrainian, “gave” Crimea, with its now predominant Russian population, to Ukraine, with little thought for its inhabitants’ wishes, albeit, putting the matter before the Politburo in Moscow where the question was posed: “What did it matter anyhow as we are all in the USSR now?” As a Ukrainian who had supported the Holodomor, indeed, he had been instrumental in its murderous implementation and it was a good public relations gesture in a highly centralised state and provided many administrative and practical benefits for Moscow, as well. Crimea had now, in any case, become a primary tourist destination for the nomenclature and a health resort for the wider Soviet population.

The topic of betrayal and fratricide, admittedly unintentional in its deadly effects, was ironically reproduced in the mid-1980s when Ukraine became the stage of the most dramatic man-made disaster at Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station. It should be acknowledged that the switch-off power plant was made locally. However, the fact that the experiments with nuclear physics were approved by Moscow and the fact that the Moscow Central Committee demanded that the Kiev authorities organise a May Day mass demonstration — despite the health risks of radiation from Chernobyl — are often quoted by Ukrainians as examples of Moscow’s perceived habit of sacrificing Ukrainians for Russian imperial glory. Therefore, for them, only independence from Russia could save them from what they considered to be “this plague” — not merely a result of radiation but of political manipulation.

Russian–Ukrainian–Western triangle: what went wrong?

“The probability of a conflict is zero!” This is how most analysts would have assessed the situation in the triangle throughout the 1990s. Despite the widely spread myth about Ukraine trying to escape Russia’s deadly embrace and join the West, relations in the triangle Russia–Ukraine–West had never been less antagonistic. In fact, the collapse of the Soviet Union and Ukrainian independence were not the results of a purely nationalist anti-Russian movement in Ukraine. The truth was that the “red directors” of the big industrial plants and coal mines of Eastern Ukraine — especially in the Donbas region — played an important part in Ukraine’s bid for independence because they believed — as they do today — that their region produced the lion share of the national wealth and suffered from the incompetence of the dysfunctional Soviet bureaucracy.

After the failed coup attempted by the Soviet conservative bureaucracy in August 1991, the Russian leader Boris Yeltsin expedited the formal termination of the Soviet Union. An agreement was signed to set up a new integration scheme for former Soviet states, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Ukraine’s state creation project had to face only one significant separatist outbreak at the time — that, in Crimea, in which the majority of the population wanted to join Russia. Kiev and Moscow, however, agreed that the peninsula should remain within Ukraine.


\(^4\) The authors do not agree and could not identify precise data on the number of Crimean Tatars who collaborated with Nazi. It is difficult to identify whether this number was disproportionately higher than the number of ethnic Russians who collaborated with Nazi in Crimea and other fronts of WWII. Nevertheless the semi-official justification for massive deportation of the Crimean Tatar from peninsula by the Soviet leadership was their alleged collaboration with Nazi and participation in ethnic cleansing. This tragedy has changed ethnographic composition of Crimea and remained long-term traumatic experience of the Tatar community.
Although separatist parties had never gained any significant electoral results as such, which allowed some analysts to claim that Ukraine was a good example of how Ukraine managed its multi-ethnic diversity and various post-imperial cleavages,⁵ many of Crimea’s inhabitants saw the peninsula as cast in a Cinderella-like mould, largely forgotten as an autonomous region, especially in terms of the lack of any Ukrainian financial largesse.

Despite such local tensions, however, throughout the 1990s, Ukraine and Russia did not see European and post-Soviet integration in antagonistic terms. Both Moscow and Kiev agreed to develop trade components of the CIS; both made a number of beneficial exemptions in multilateral and bilateral trade, which was signed in 1994. Indeed, Moscow and Kiev simultaneously conducted negotiations with the EU on concluding the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements and signed them at about the same time, although it took longer for the EU to ratify the agreement with Russia because of the war in Chechnya. As a result, the CIS and EU had not become mutually exclusive and controversial issues in Russian–Ukrainian relations.⁶ The discourse of Ukraine’s growing links to Europe, therefore, had not yet infringed on Russia’s national interests.

First tensions: the economy

The first tensions in the relations in the Russian–Ukrainian–Western triangle appeared in 2002–2003. The EU meticulously prepared and negotiated with Russia all the contentious issues about the EU Big Bang Enlargement in 2002–2003. However, it showed no interest in discussing with Russia the newly launched European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which targeted their shared neighbourhood. Although Moscow did not have a problem with the policy per se, it was unhappy with the fact that it was not consulted when the ENP was elaborated. As a response to the EU active engagement in the region, Russian leader Vladimir Putin set his goal to deepen the economic cooperation in the post-Soviet space and to launch a Common Economic Space. Unfortunately, in Ukraine, the project was promoted by the highly controversial President Leonid Kuchma, who was heavily criticised at home for his undemocratic practices and semi-transparent privatisation of the strategic assets of the Ukrainian economy.

In that context, the accession of Ukraine to the Common Economic Space was seen as an attempt of the authoritarian president to drag the country back into the Soviet authoritarian past. Moreover, the fact that in 2004 outgoing President Kuchma supported Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych at the presidential elections heavily compromised Eurasian integration. Yanukovych’s criminal past and his campaign built on the promise of closer cooperation with Russia resulted in a further strengthening of the link between the concept of “Eurasian” and other negative signifiers such as authoritarianism and criminality. Return to Europe was now considered as a choice between two competing civilisations.⁷ Russia, in its turn, started viewing the “Orange Revolution” as a geopolitical plot masterminded by the West, with the aim of squeezing Russia out of its traditional sphere of influence.

First tensions: ideology

Despite the widely spread myth about the clash between pro-Russians and the allegedly “pro-Western” President Viktor Yushchenko, Ukraine followed the same pragmatic line of cooperation with Russia. On the one hand, Yushchenko promoted further economic integration with the EU. On the other hand, he paid his first foreign visit to Moscow and stressed further interest to maintain normal trade relations with Russia. Trade turn-over and Russian investment in Ukraine grew significantly. It was an ideological factor which led to further tensions in the relations in the

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Since 2003, Russia’s great power identity was based on the idea of the Soviet victory in the Second World War. Celebrating and commemorating the great Soviet victory over Nazism and justifying some of Stalin’s patriotic policies became important nation-building tools under President Putin, thereby bolstering his support. Huge investments were thrown into cultural activities, education, and other forms of promotion of this “heroic deed.” The Commission against the Falsification of History was set up in order to pre-empt any attempt to undermine the heroic image of Russia’s role in its victory over Nazism. In this context, President Yushchenko’s attempts to heroise the fighters of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, some of whom supported the Nazis, were a direct challenge, not only to Russia’s narratives of international history and consequently its role in contemporary international affairs. As a result, several trade wars erupted and relations deteriorated significantly. So it was not the economic interests per se, but the question pertaining to its status in the international arena that drove Russia’s policies in the triangle.

It is noticeable that the EU–Ukraine Association talks continued even when an allegedly more pro-Russian President of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovych, took over in 2010. It should be noted that the pro-Russian and authoritarian government under Yanukovych made more significant progress in adopting European legislation and standards. Even though Brussels expressed numerous concerns about the selective justice against the opposition leaders, those eventually were dropped and the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement, with a special Deep Comprehensive Free Trade Area, was finalised by July 2013 and was set to be signed at EU–Eastern Partnership Summit on 28 November 2013.

**The Ukraine crisis: a series of mishaps or a deep-rooted Russian–European conflict?**

Although the initial assessment of the probability of conflict was zero, the chain of events which led to the Ukrainian revolution was a manifestation of three separate processes. The first process was the growing resentment against Yanukovych within Ukrainian society. The second process was the growing lack of attention by the top EU leaders to the processes in Ukraine and Russia which led to the growing visibility of the pro-Ukrainian democracy-promotion lobby in the US and the EU and the ignoring of the role of a minority of new-Nazi militants. The third process was the growing Eurasian integration and Russia’s interest in winning Ukraine into the Customs Union. These three processes resonated in November 2013 and led to the international crisis of 2014–2015. We will consider the three processes and demonstrate that this three-fold analysis allows us to bust existing myths about Ukraine.

Firstly, Ukrainian opposition and pro-Ukrainian intellectuals tried to depict the Kiev protests as a result of President Yanukovych’s refusal to sign the EU–Ukraine Association at the Summit of Eastern Partnership in November 2013. This is an idealistic generalisation. Indeed, some rallies were held to protest against Yanukovych’s decision to postpone Association talks, but those were not massive and violent. It was the brutal assault by the riot police against a small group of students which led to bigger and more violent protests. The fact that several self-defence groups in the Ukrainian revolution represented ultra-nationalist and anti-European ideology demonstrates that there were other driving forces behind the revolution. In fact, the de-legitimisation of President Yanukovych started much earlier than the two waves of anti-government protests in 2010 and 2011. These were organised by retired army officers and small entrepreneurs. In 2011, retired army officers, mostly Russian speakers, stormed the building of the Ukrainian parliament and beat up several police officers. The protests of 2013–2014 were a continuation of these protests and had nothing to do with nationalism or the Russia–Europe dilemma.

The second process was the most unfortunate mix of the technocratic agenda of the European Commission and the lack of interest on behalf of top leadership of the EU to address Russia’s growing grievances. As a result, the European Commission had a mandate to conduct bilateral EU–Ukraine negotiations without the participation of Russia and had no competences to speak about broader geopolitical context of this process. At the same time, although middle-rank European diplomats reporting from the region repeatedly stressed Russia’s growing militancy, top
officials at the EU showed no interest in launching dialogue with Russia on them. Instead of going to Moscow and talking to the Kremlin leadership (as was the case during the “Big Bang” enlargement during the 2000s), the EU High Representative, Catherine Ashton, chose instead to write an article in the Russian newspaper Kommersant in which she stated that the EU does not think in terms of sphere of influences and called on Russia to give up this type of thinking. Since the EU High Representative had such a low profile, the twitter statements of some radically minded representatives of the EU member states came to fill the vacuum. This unfortunate combination strengthened Russia’s negative geopolitical interpretations of events and unleashed Russia’s forceful campaign for Eurasian integration. During the Maidan uprising, the US Deputy Secretary of State, Victoria Nuland, attended the camp of protestors and distributed sandwiches, further strengthening the prevailing conspiracy-geopolitical interpretations prevalent in Moscow.

The third process was Eurasian integration and Russia’s overtures to bring Ukraine into its Customs Union. Although this integration is often presented as Moscow’s “neo-imperial project,” the reality is quite different. One of the active promoters of the Eurasian Union was Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who formulated the project and promoted it ever since 1994.8 With the Putin’s ascent to power, Russia made significant effort to make the project fly. For example, it repeatedly agreed to set up a consensual voting system within the bodies of the Customs Union between Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan although the size of these respective economies are incomparable.9 Russia also promised significant discounts for its natural gas for Belarus and agreed to remove customs obstacles for Belarus and Kazakh trade. Despite all these efforts, Ukrainian elites — democratic and pro-Russian — as well as the broader society were extremely wary of this initiative.

The economic benefits for Ukraine were questionable, and the people who were involved in lobbying the Eurasian integration had extremely controversial reputations. In his campaign, President Putin heavily relied on his close relative and long-term advisor on Ukraine, Viktor Medvedchuk, who was heavily compromised as former Head of the Presidential Administration of ex-president Kuchma. A significant part of the information campaign was conducted through the media, associated with businessman Dmytro Firtash, widely known for his participation as an intermediary in the non-transparent Russian–Ukrainian gas deals. Eventually, leading Ukrainian politicians and economists coined a new label for the Customs Union. The Russian and Ukrainian terms for the Customs Union (Tamozhenny Soyuz and Mytny Soyuz, respectively) was paraphrased into the Taiga Union (Tayezhenny Soyuz) or Gloomy Union (Mutny) to connote an obscure, wild, and uncivilised nature as characteristic of it. As a result, there was no substantive debate about the Eurasian integration and it was framed mostly in ideological terms — Russia’s restoration of empire.

These kinds of interpretations and the high visibility of ultra-right parties in the Ukrainian protests, as well as significant presence of European and US policy makers in Maidan, further played into Russia’s geopolitical narrative, namely, that the US and the West are nurturing the most reprehensible neo-Nazi forces in order to turn Ukraine into an anti-Russian bulkhead. Even though NATO membership was the last thing the Ukrainian protesters had in mind, Moscow considered that this would be the main outcome and decided that the cradle of Russian civilisation and its principal strategic asset — Crimea — must not end up in the West’s hands. The operation “Polite People” followed and Crimea came under the Russian control. But this was only beginning of the Ukrainian drama. Most unfortunately, no sides of the triangle drew any conclusions from their mistakes which would have enabled them to avoid further violence.

The political situation in Ukraine was aggravated further by the fact that the Ukrainian Orthodox churches (UOCs), one canonical, the other two non-canonical, were involved in the conflict. As

8 Mikhail A. Molchanov, Eurasian Regionalisms and Russian Foreign Policy (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).
mentioned above, initially it was the Kievan princes who started the conversion of the medieval Slavic tribes into Orthodox Christianity, but with the growing power of Moscovy, the religious centre of Slavic Orthodox moved from Kiev to Moscow. As a result, the canonical UOC has been a subordinate part of the Moscow Patriarchate (MP) for centuries. After independence, some Ukrainian political figures established an independent UOC with its own patriarchate in Kiev (KP). This was not accepted by other official canonical Orthodox churches both inside and outside Ukraine. There was, moreover, the second non-canonical UOC, accepted by neither of the previous ones, not to mention the Greek rite Catholic Church of Ukraine which follows many Orthodox rituals and a Latin rite which looks to Poland. The recent meeting of Pope Francis and Russian Patriarch Kirill in Havana has created a wide international sense of rapprochement between the two churches, but has yet to achieve a more harmonious relationship on the ground in Ukraine, even between the Greek rite Catholic Church and the Russian Orthodox Church (UOC–MP).

The latter had always supported close cooperation with Moscow and often — during the Ukrainian revolution — restated the exhortations of the Patriarch of Moscow, who called upon Ukraine not to blindly follow European fashion, but rather to bring to Europe the Church’s own spiritual values and ideals. It also blamed both sides for the violence. At the same time, the non-canonical UOC–KP has explicitly supported the European integration of Ukraine and spoken out against the authoritarian practices of President Yanukovych. When police used what was generally perceived to be excessive violence to disperse student demonstrations, it was the Monastery of St Michael of the KP which opened its gates to provide refuge to wounded protestors chased by the police. Afterwards, the UOC–KP Patriarch of Kiev Filaret directly criticised Yanukovych for his use of authoritarian and brutal practices.

The situation has become further aggravated during the conflict in Donbas when UOC–MP supported and sometimes directly assisted pro-Russian forces. Some of these troops were fighting under the banners of Orthodoxy, for example, that of the so-called Orthodox Army. In this antagonistic situation, a significant part of pro-Ukrainian believers decided to switch their loyalty to the KP and demanded that their priests do the same. Thus, a significant proportion of believers changed their allegiance, with an increasing number of Ukrainians becoming adherents of the KP. That said, the MP still controlled most of the religious building fabric of Ukraine. This situation may lead to a further deterioration of relations between the two main rival Orthodox churches. Some radical groups on both sides even exerted violent pressure against some priests, occasioning a number of deaths.

The war in Ukraine and European security

The current situation in Ukraine demonstrates the miscalculations of all three sides in this conflict. Firstly, although a possible Russian takeover of Ukraine was greeted and supported by significant part of the local population, the situation in eastern Ukraine was not quite what Moscow had anticipated. Russia’s lack of expertise with respect to the situation in Donbas has been repeatedly highlighted by experts and journalists. Despite its strong interests in Ukraine, some of the leading Russian think tanks kept producing reductionist narratives which depicted the entire south-east of Ukraine as an area populated by a Russian-speaking population threatened by Ukrainian ethno-nationalist radicals and dreaming about the reunion with Russia. This was a serious miscalculation. Unlike Crimea, the Ukrainian south-east has a very strong regional identity which is not linked exclusively to Russia. As a result, even though some of the local population supported the separatist movement, they were sometimes driven by local pride and/or a wish to negotiate a more independent position for their region vis-à-vis the centre. Therefore, when Russian-backed units moved into Donbas, Luhansk, and other smaller cities and towns of the region, they were bitterly disappointed by the fact that the local population was not keen to join the army of a newly imagined regional Novorossiya (the term was first used for the south of Ukraine in the 18th century) and to fight for the independence of a new independent Donetsk People’s Republic and Lugansk People’s Republic, in the most eastern regions of Ukraine. There were numerous reports

by Ukrainian, Russian, and international media that Russia had to use regular troops to secure the survival of these republics, either as “volunteers” or in other capacities.

Secondly, Ukraine pursued a reductionist interpretation which construed events in the Donbas as an entirely Russian conspiracy which would fall apart once “several dozens of Russian infiltrators” were driven out of the region. When Ukrainian troops were ordered to march into the region, they were repeatedly blocked by the rallies of the local population. Repeated downings of Ukrainian military planes and the shelling of its troops by pro-Russian forces led to a further military escalation by Ukraine. Even though currently some Ukrainian experts acknowledge the presence of elements of the local population amongst the fighters of the self-proclaimed republics, Kiev understandably continues to feel threatened by potential Russian expansion. Some statements by Ukrainian top officials about a possible military intervention to achieve the return of Crimea — the wishes of the majority of people in Crimea notwithstanding — further aggravated the situation.

One major blunder of the West has been its half-hearted and self-defeating approach. On the one hand, the sanctions adopted against Russia have caused a significant discomfort for the Russian elites and upper middle class but, on the other, have not sufficiently harmed them to cause a serious or immediate danger for its economy. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande, at first, offered their mediation to Russia and Ukraine. However, they stopped after the Minsk accords were concluded. There was no sufficient understanding of the fact that for Russia the process of negotiations with other great powers was more important than the outcome. The conflict in Donbas is one in which, in any case, Russia’s great power status has been increased. In addition, the absence of the US from the negotiations makes them look more symbolic than real. This situation will most likely lead to a further deterioration of the situation, not least, because for everyone involved, Ukraine’s most serious problems relate to corruption.

A half-empty glass?

Russia’s policy in south-eastern Ukraine is also far from a coherent expansion strategy. It contains two different components. First, northern and central parts of the Donetsk region will most likely be turned into another frozen conflict zone similar to Transnistria. The self-proclaimed republics will be used to exhaust Kiev and to facilitate bargaining with Europe. With military bases and training camps set up by Russian instructors around the Donetsk region, with Russian military personnel commanding local forces, and a growing concrete defence infrastructure, the region is becoming a genuine stronghold of Russian influence in the east of Ukraine.

The south of the region, including the Azov coast, also has specific strategic value and constitutes the second element of Russian strategy. It is the gateway to an overland corridor to Crimea, which Russia badly needs in order to secure supplies of electricity, water, and food to the peninsula and to avoid dependency on a bridge now being constructed over the Straits of Kerch. This route will stretch through several Ukrainian regions beyond Donbas, and Russia would have to put in a lot of work to get it through to Crimea. The port city of Mariupol is the key to this corridor. With the blocking of the overland water supply to Crimea by some Ukrainian activists, the peninsula remains in a difficult position. Currently, the new authorities are heavily reliant upon river resources and artesian drills in order to secure water. This move may, in all likelihood, result in the loss of arable land and, consequently, an increased shortage of water and food supplies. Therefore, the capturing of Mariupol by Russia to alleviate these issues has raised alarm amongst many Ukrainian nationalists. Moreover, Mariupol has a quite strong pro-Ukrainian sentiment, and the local Greek community — unlike that in Crimea — has been vocal in calling Greece to protect them from any possible incursions by Russia. Such a Greek response, however, would be highly unlikely in its current economic straits. Be that as it may, it is highly likely that the war will continue unless the West makes stronger effort to resolve this issue, bearing in mind that Russian leadership would be reluctant to abandon the Russian ethnic population of Eastern Ukraine to its enemies in this conflict.
Conclusions

The main conclusion of this paper is that the West’s complacency and ignorance were some of the principal causes of the Ukraine crisis. A lack of focus on the processes unfolding inside Ukraine and Russia made the West move ahead with EU–Ukraine talks despite the impending violent upheavals in Ukraine and a growing geopolitical resentment in Russia and certain separatist attitudes amongst citizens of Ukraine who identified themselves as ethnic Russians. Scepticism about how far Russia would be prepared to go resulted in the West taking half measures to address some of the symptoms of the situation rather than the causes.

Growing frustration of the West with the incompetence and corruption of the Ukrainian ruling elite and the failure of the Ukrainian democratic process to fulfil many of its original expectations are further aggravating the situation. Furthermore, the incorporation of Crimea into the Russian economy has been hampered by the blockade maintained not by Ukrainian government forces, but by Ukrainian paramilitaries, a visible minority of which share a neo-Nazi ideology. The current construction of the bridge linking the Russian mainland with Crimea over the Kerch Straits, which attempts to compensate for this, has great symbolic importance to the majority of Crimeans, who see it as a happy reunion with Russia. However, a number of small local entrepreneurs, not used to the Russian economic system, are discontented with the new bureaucratic strictures and the growing dominance of large Russian companies in the region. The Crimean Tatars remain one ethnic minority the majority of which remain opposed to the reunion with Russia, for well-known historical reasons touched upon above. Russia’s outlawing of the Mejlis — the main representative body of the Crimean Tatars — as “an extremist organisation,” in April 2016, will lead to further escalation of the situation on the peninsula. With respect to the east of mainland Ukraine itself, the level of chaos and lawlessness has been reduced. As a result of the measures taken by Russians and those supporting greater links with Russia, two leading figures have come to the fore, Alexander Zakharchenko, in Donetsk, and Igor Plotnitsky, in Luhansk, who have become the unquestioned authorities in these areas, thereby quelling further local conflicts and resistance.

According to Tatyana Malyarenko, analyst from the region, the situation is further exacerbated because Kiev tries to minimise the influence of both Russia and the “republics” on its foreign and domestic policies and domestic markets through economic sanctions and transport and trade blockade of Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk.10

The main recommendation of this paper is that the West, as well as those immediately involved, should eschew polemic and doctrinaire ideologies in favour of formulating a well-thought-out strategy of negotiations with respect to the crisis, based on an accurate understanding of its historical roots, the emotional charges it exerts on those involved, and present-day realities, including the demands of those on both sides of the divide and — not least — their willingness to invest the vast economic resources required to bring all of Ukraine, both east and west, to its feet.

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