

Ukraine's Struggle for Independence

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In this article, I summarize the justification for Ukrainian state sovereignty, in spite of Russia's claim of the non-existence of such sovereignty. The Russians invaded Ukraine claiming their right to justify their interests. The occupation of Crimea by Russian forces and their declaration of its annexation to Russia was an act of aggression disapproved of by the United Nations (2014). I also outline the nature of the limited war between Ukraine and Russia that is managed by ethnic Russians living in the Donbas region and Russian emissaries.

Ukraine's glory has not yet died,
Nor her freedom,
Upon us, my young brothers,
Fate shall yet smile.
Our enemies will perish,
Like dew in the morning sun.
And we too shall rule,
In our own land.
(National Anthem of Ukraine)

Introduction

The struggle between the Ukrainian people and their former superiors, the Russians, is a struggle for independence.¹ The Ukrainian state is still fighting for its independence from the occupation of the Russians, and Poles. Many Russian intellectuals claim that Ukraine has no right to exist as an independent state; the Ukrainians and the Russians have the same culture and are the same people. Moreover, the nobility of both peoples, the Ukrainians and the Russians are descendants of the Scandinavian tribes, the Varangians, who settled in Kiev in the ninth century.

1. Independence is defined as a condition of a person, nation, country, or state in which its residents and population, or some portion thereof, exercise self-government, and usually sovereignty, over the territory. According to Walter Benjamin (1966 [1921]): 'Whether the attainment of independence is different from revolution has long been contested, and has often been debated over the question of violence as legitimate means to achieving sovereignty.'

The growth of the ethnic split between the two mostly distinct national communities – the western territories that preserve a traditional agricultural culture – and the eastern and southern industrialized territories of Ukraine, the Donbas, whose development was based on emigration from Russia and assimilation by Russian peoples, was one of the main reasons for retarded Ukrainian democracy building. During the Soviet period, there was a tolerant coexistence of these two communities, based on a common Soviet identity. Since independence, this has given way to the growth of regional patriotism, an emphasis on ethnic differences, and a willingness to sacrifice the unity of Ukraine by eastern and southern Ukrainian nationalists from one side, and western Ukrainian nationalists from the other side. Although 83.9% of voters in the Donetsk region supported independence, the people in these regions did not have special sympathy for Ukrainian nationalism. Opinion polls in 2015 showed that 90% of Ukrainians supported independence and territorial integrity, a figure that once was as low as 56%.

The occupation of Crimea by Russian forces and its annexation by Russia was an act of aggression, justified by Vladimir Putin by the ‘fact’ that the Russian population in Crimea was under direct threat from the ‘fascists’ who had engineered the ‘coup’ in Kyiv and therefore needed protecting. Russia employed a spectrum of escalating destabilization tactics in order to shape the nature and outlook of the political regime in Ukraine, including diplomatic and economic pressure, propaganda campaigns, and low-intensity proxy warfare, including military occupation. Nevertheless, the military aggression by Russia, its annexation of Crimea and invasion of parts of Donbas in eastern Ukraine, has destroyed Ukraine’s trade dependency on Russia, and Russia has lost much of what influence it had over Ukrainian economics and politics.

Ukrainian Culture

Ukraine is a country with competing nationalisms and cultural orientations that are a product of the country’s colonization by imperial powers and the legacies of Soviet totalitarianism, which has produced a regionally diverse country. Ukraine’s history is closely intertwined with that of Poland, and Ukrainian ethnic and national identity has been shaped by interactions with both Russia and Poland. Eastern and southern Ukraine had been integral parts of the Russian Empire for centuries, starting in 1654, with an elite that was tied to Russia. The incorporation of those parts of Ukraine by Russia resulted in a profoundly ambiguous sense of collective identity devoid of a distinct historical consciousness. Moreover, in the great purges of the 1930s, Russian administrators and engineers loyal to Moscow replaced the local managers and engineers of the coal mines and industrial plants in eastern and southern Ukraine (Fitzpatrick 1979, 381, Shinar 2012, 7). This process helped to develop Russian culture and loyalty to it in those regions.

A desire to give local stakeholders more influence in policy matters, including in education, quickly lost out to concerns about state unity and integrity among the

political elite in Kyiv. The separatist movements in the most ethnically Russian regions of the Donbas and the Crimea, which had gained considerable strength during the Kravchuk presidency (1991–1994), alarmed Kyiv. Kuchma's (1994–2005) decision to continue the cultural policies of his predecessor reflects the conviction among Ukraine's ruling elite that language, national identity and loyalty to the state are intimately related. This elite, although Russian-speaking, thinks that Ukrainian statehood can only be secured in the long run if it is supported by a cultural identity distinct from that of Russia. If we accept that one of the fundamental premises of colonization is that the imperialist tries to instil in the territory of the colonized culture a conviction of the superiority of its own culture and ideology, Ukraine fits this description very well. For centuries, Moscow viewed Ukrainian culture as peripheral and inferior, while the Russian culture and language were treated as superior and universal. The long period of Russian rule led to considerable Russification in most of Ukraine, both through cultural influence and through migration processes and urbanization when masses of ethnic Russians were resettled in the east and south of Ukraine. Thus, there appeared two mutually exclusive identities: pro-European and pro-Russian, which has been the basis for the formation of regional and lingo-ethnic cleavages. The current resonance of these two identities has become visible not only in political preferences but also in economic orientations.

The Dissolution of the Soviet Union in December of 1991 allowed the successor states to distance themselves from Russia and to renegotiate the bilingual compromise. In contrast to many postcolonial countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, the new Ukrainian governments did not want to preserve Russian as one of its official languages – rather, they wanted to create a new linguistic regime, where Russian would play only a supporting role or no role at all. Historically, mainstream Russian political thought never considered Ukraine to be anything other than *Malorossiia* (Little Russia) and Ukrainians as an offshoot of a larger *obshcherusskii* (all-Russian nation). Thus, Vissarion Belinsky (1811–1848), perhaps the foremost representative of Russian Westernism, could write that,

Little Russia was never a state and consequently it did not have a history in the strict sense of the word . . . The history of Little Russia is a stream discharging into the great river of Russian history. Little Russians were always a tribe and never a nation. (Cited by Mykola 1988, 250; Solchanyk 1994 49)

Nevertheless, Ukraine has been an independent state since December 1991. The proportion of voters supporting Ukrainian independence in December 1991 was 54.19% in Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) and 57.07% in Sevastopol. In Crimean ASSR, the percentage of voters supporting Ukrainian independence was the lowest in Ukraine (Demokratychna Ukraina 1991). The new Russians, especially first generations inhabitants of Ukraine, are oriented toward Russia and do not intend to become part of Ukrainian society. According to recent research, the current older generation of ethnic Russians are hostile to Ukraine and still oriented toward Moscow, while the younger Russians are more oriented toward

Ukraine and the West (Reznick 2016; see also S. Shulman's interview with V.I. Parbii in Shulman 1998, 620).

Today, the Ukrainian regime might be described as personal authoritarianism, as it has matured beyond its initial reliance on the oligarchs. There has also been a competitive authoritarian hybrid regime, which provides space for opposition, social activity and a limited free media. These factors allow the opposition to participate in state institutions and let international organizations operate more or less freely in the country.

The success of post-communist transition in Central Europe has depended on civil movements, the basis of transfer of power to people of the new political class. A key aspect of this success was that the subjects of these civil movements valued market transformations and democratization. Since there were no geopolitical dilemmas and identification divisions in the post-communist societies of Central Europe and the Baltic countries, the combination of pro-European aspirations and the value-orientations of civil movements led to a successful transition in these countries, completed in the early 2000s. In contrast, the early 2000s in Ukraine only marked the beginning of the establishment of civil movements. The low level of Ukrainian civil movements' participation and civic awareness development, and the prevalence of corruption, weaken the process of nation building. Ukraine began to democratize its media sector in the early 1990s. Censorship was abolished in 1991, and in 1992 the Ukrainian parliament adopted legislation that legalized private ownership of media. While the media in Ukraine resemble the media in the advanced democracies in some respects, they have much more in common with the media in Romania, Bulgaria and the Western Balkan countries. The underdeveloped media markets in these countries are breeding grounds for the use of media in the interest of governments and political-economic elites rather than of the general population.

Corruption

A negative influence on the nation-building process in Ukraine is corruption, which is a symptom of the weakness of the state. The most important factor leading to corruption was the non-transparent privatization when major industrial plants were sold, without contenders, and at low prices to a few influential business groups. Rampant corruption among the elites accelerated the social and economic deterioration. The fundamental insight is that corruption pervades not only Ukraine's economy but also its politics, and this corruption depends only marginally on who is in power. The current system will allow no one to come to power who is not prepared to play the old corrupt game. The following statistics allude to this fact. According to the data of the International Transparency Organization in 2011, Ukraine ranked in 144th place, along with Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Iran, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic. According to the Corruption Perception Index, on a scale of zero to 100, with zero indicating the highest level of corruption, Russia ranked 127th with 28 points, Kazakhstan 140th with 26 points, and Ukraine 144th with

25 points. The former Soviet Union countries Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan ranked 168th place with 17 points. By the standard of the International Transparency Organization, scoring under 30 points is a 'disgrace to the nation' (Transparency International 2012; Shveda 2015, 86).

Since the mid-1990s, Ukraine has been dominated by a score of oligarchs. When there is a change at the top, weary Ukrainians ask not whether corruption will decline, but rather who will benefit from it under the new rule. As in other post-Soviet states, the presidency, which has been the basis of power in post-Soviet Ukraine, is the key institution for representing the interests of the oligarchs – the powerful business tycoons who emerged in Ukraine in the 1990s. The Ukrainian presidents managed relations with Russia with a view to securing the economic benefits specifically sought by the oligarchs (such as access to the Russian market and lower energy prices for Ukraine's energy-intensive industries), who in return facilitated the political survival of the successive presidents. Ukraine relied on energy supplies from Russia and, with its hugely inefficient energy use and energy-intensive industries, was one of the largest consumers of Russian gas in the world. Despite being an energy-poor state, Ukraine behaved like an energy-rich state and heavily subsidized gas prices for residential users, meaning that low gas prices were of the utmost importance for the Ukrainian economy and state budget.

In 2007, negotiations started on an Association Treaty between Ukraine and the European Union, whereas the negotiations on the economic part of the agreement were launched after Ukraine's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2008. Ironically, however, while Ukraine was a demander in relations with the EU, asking for 'deep' integration up to and including membership, its elites, the oligarchs, were unwilling to pay the high economic cost of moving away from Russia. Ukraine still has a 'deep state' of powerful interest groups that run the country behind the scenes. Oligarchs, and the politicians and bureaucrats in their pockets, remain hard to dislodge (Wilson 2015, 262).

Viktor Yanukovich was Putin's chosen Maser of Ukraine, as Condoleezza Rice recounts,

'Meet Viktor Yanukovich, who is running for the presidency of Ukraine.' Vladimir Putin and I were standing in his office at the presidential dacha in late 2004 when Yanukovich suddenly appeared from a back room. Putin wanted me to get the point. He is my man, Ukraine is ours – and do not forget it . . . Putin is saying that Ukraine will never be free to make its own choices – a message meant to reverberate in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states – and that Russia has special interests it will pursue at all costs. (Rice 2014, 17)

However, Yanukovich was a serial election fraudster who presided over election fraud as regional governor in the 1999 and 2002 elections, as prime minister in the 2004 elections, and as president in the 2012 elections. The Orange revolution and the anti-government protests – the Euromaidan – in the opinion of Yanukovich and Putin were Western-backed coups that, for Yanukovich, deprived a legitimate candidate of the presidency, and, for Putin, orchestrated a 'fascist driven' coup against a legitimate president (Kuzio 2015a, 179–180). In 2011, Oleksandr Yanukovich, the

president's son, after being granted the lion's share of government tenders, entered the list of Ukraine's top 100 wealthiest people. In 2014, then Acting Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk accused the Yanukovich regime of having stolen US\$37 billion from the state during its four years in power (Aslund 2014, 65). Yanukovich was convicted in 1967 with the charge of theft and, in 1970, he was sentenced to two years for 'infliction of bodily injuries of medium seriousness'. Donetsk voters viewed Yanukovich's imprisonment for theft and violence as a *neschastya* (misfortune) rather than as making him morally unfit to be Ukrainian president, a view that was common among western and central Ukrainian voters. In the end, President Yanukovich left behind a country economically in crisis and financially bankrupt that required billions of dollars in Western assistance to stave off the country's default (Rice 2014, 184).

Following the 2014 Ukrainian revolution and the resulting removal of Viktor Yanukovich from the office of President of Ukraine, hastily arranged presidential elections led to Petro Poroshenko, an oligarchic billionaire, becoming Ukraine's fifth president. In 2016 it was revealed that Poroshenko had an offshore holding company, his economic minister, Aivaras Abromavičius, resigned in protest and the much-maligned former Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk eventually quit as well (to be replaced by Poroshenko's ally Volodymyr Groysman) (Smith 2017, 65). The old Ukrainian politico-economic class, with President Poroshenko himself at the helm, was still defending the kleptocratic system of patronage politics, rent-seeking, central control, and informal exchanges that emerged after the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

'Euromaidan'

Some say that a new Ukraine was born on the Maidan. The anti-government protests in 2013 and 2014, sometimes called 'Euromaidan' and even 'Revolution of 2014', had put an end to the post-Soviet age in Ukraine. The protests implied the true end of the Soviet system and the beginning of genuine Ukrainian sovereignty. Taras Kuzio describes the protests as a Revolution of Dignity – the policies of Viktor Yanukovich, who had won the 2010 Ukrainian presidential elections, provoked popular protests that became the Euromaidan. Yanukovich's unwillingness to compromise and his fear of leaving office led to violence and the breakdown of the state structures, opening the way for Russia's interventions in the Crimea and Eastern Ukraine (Kuzio 2015b, 157).

From the very beginning of the protest actions on Maidan, the pro-European and democratically oriented movement included not only ethnic Ukrainians but also representatives of different ethnic minorities such as ethnic Russians, Crimean Tatars, Muslims, Jews and Poles. The protest started as a peaceful demonstration organized by middle-class representatives. The demonstrators were in favour of signing the Association Treaty between Ukraine and the European Union that had been postponed by the government. Today, most Ukrainians will insist that their struggle

against Russia is not about the economic advantages of being associated with the European Union but rather about their right to self-determination, both as individuals and as a people. In the eyes of many observers, Euromaidan was another expression of the ongoing struggle for ideological hegemony between Russia and the West. Indeed, it marked a new stage in the evolution of Ukraine as an independent and sovereign state (Diuk 2014, 9).

The Orange Revolution and the Revolution of 2014

A small but growing body of literature has analysed the causes of why Ukraine's revolutions of 2004 and 2014 had opposing outcomes, with the 2004 Orange Revolution initiating a peaceful transition to democracy while the 2014 protests escalated into armed conflict. Lawrence Freedman analysed Russia's tactical decision-making during the Ukrainian crisis and holds that the escalation into violence was a consequence of failed crisis management on both sides (Freedman 2014, 13). Julia Strasheim (2016, 25) and Olexandr Reznik (2016, 751) dismiss this reasoning, holding that when Viktor Yushchenko, a follower of the western policy, came to power in 2004, the replacement of the presidential system of government with a parliamentary-presidential one gave the Kremlin the levers of influence in Ukraine. It sent a signal to Viktor Yanukovich's allies that it was time to change sides and block Ukraine's movement toward EU and NATO.

Crimea

If Western Ukraine is not part of the Russian *rodina* (fatherland), Crimea – often referred to as the 'land of Russian glory' – certainly is. Victories in wars against Turkey in the eighteenth century, Stalin's deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944, and the subsequent Soviet-organized Russian immigration into Crimea (which turned Russians there into a majority) gave the Russians cause to consider the Crimean peninsula 'Russian', historically without connection to Ukraine.

In 1992, in Sevastopol, Aleksander Rutskoi, the former Vice-President of the Russian Federation, renewed Russia's claim to Crimea with the argument that 'common sense' dictated that the peninsula should be part of Russia:

If one turns to history, then again history is not on the side of those who are trying to appropriate this land. If, in 1954, perhaps under the influence of a hangover or sunstroke, the appropriate documents were signed according to which Crimea was transferred to the jurisdiction of Ukraine, I am sorry, and such a document does not cancel out the history of Crimea. (Pravda Ukrainy 1992; Solchanyk 1994, 54)

Indeed, according to Lawrence Freedman (2014, 25), 'The position of Crimea was anomalous. Khrushchev had transferred it from Russia to Ukraine as the result of a somewhat quixotic gesture in 1954.' Still, in a 1994 memorandum, the United States, Britain and Russia committed themselves to, among other things, respect the territorial

integrity and political independence of Ukraine, not to use or threaten the use of force, not to engage in economic coercion, and to consult one another in the event of a question arising about these commitments. Russia has violated each of these commitments, saying that the 1994 memorandum is no longer binding because Ukraine is no longer the same as it was in 1994. This position represents bad faith and poor legal reasoning as well as doubtful strategy: commitments do not change with governments unless explicitly renounced (Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine's Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons 5 December 1994; Shinar 2017, 651). The Nobel Prize laureate Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, on the eve of the Ukrainian referendum of independence, in December 1991, proposed that the vote be considered not in sum, but rather on a regional basis insofar as 'each *oblast* should decide for itself where it belongs'. As it turned out, Solzhenitsyn would very probably have been disappointed: Crimea, Sevastopol and the majority of the 24 *oblasti* of Ukraine opted for independence (Solzhenitsyn 1991).

Vladimir Putin, in all his explanations of the annexation of Crimea, has consistently emphasized, first, that Crimea is historically Russian; second, that it holds a revered place in Russian memory and culture; and third, that the Russian population in Crimea was under direct threat from the 'fascists' who had engineered the 'coup' in Kyiv and therefore needed protecting. According to Putin, an extreme nationalist programme threatened the human rights of the large Russian minority resident in Crimea and Ukraine at large.

For Putin, the time to act against Ukraine and the West had arrived. Shortly after 22 February 2013, Putin ordered Russian forces to occupy Crimea, and soon after he incorporated it into Russia. The speed and effectiveness of the Russian actions, both military and 'political', clearly show that this kind of 'scenario' had been prepared for Crimea for quite a long time (Machnikowski 2017, 172; Menon and Rumer 2015, 83; Kofman *et al.* 2017). As Y. Kravtsova (2017, 30) writes: 'There are indicators that the invasion of Crimea was a contingency Russia had been preparing for since Ukrainian's Orange Revolution in 2004 and updated following the beginning of the Maidan protests in 2013.' Bartles and McDermott (2014, 59) have analysed how Russia used its Rapid Reaction Forces in the Crimea operation to achieve strategic effects.

At UN Security Council meetings on 1 and 3 March 2014, the United States insisted that there was no evidence to support Russian allegations of actions against and threats to minority groups in Ukraine, or more specifically to ethnic Russians or the Russian Federation. The controversy over whether the events leading to Yanukovich's departure constituted a revolution, as the new Ukrainian authorities argue, or a coup d'état, does not provide any basis for Russian military actions in Crimea (UN Security Council 2014a; UN Security Council 2014b; remarks by Samantha Power 2014). Sanshiro Hosaka claims that 'The Crimea operation seems to have been a well-considered and proactive move to secure what Russians call their "geopolitical interests": keeping Ukraine in Russia's orbit' (Hosaka 2018, 363).

Lilia Shevtsova, a Russian public intellectual, considers the annexation of Crimea as a destructive process:

The annexation of Crimea, 'approved' by a local referendum held after Russian armed forces had occupied the peninsula, conjured up historical parallels to the Third Reich's Anschluss with Austria and wresting of the Sudetenland away from Czechoslovakia. Today's Russia has taken on the role of a revanchist state. In order to preserve the status quo inside Russia, the Kremlin has ventured to undermine the world order and the principles underlying it. (Shevtsova 2014, 77)

In 2008, Russia accused Georgia of 'aggression against South Ossetia', occupied the Georgian territories South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and declared them 'Autonomous Republics'. Mikheil Saakashvili, President of Georgia at that time, commented:

In the 1930s, Nazi Germany occupied part of neighboring Czechoslovakia under the pretext of protecting ethnic Germans. Today, Russia is claiming to protect ethnic Russians – or people with hastily distributed Russian passports – in Crimea or Georgian territories. In September 1938, when Germany annexed the Sudetenland, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain called the situation 'a quarrel in a far-away country, between people of whom we know nothing.' Similarly, some question today whether the West should bother about Ukraine, saying Russia has more at stake than the West. Many in the West are talking about the need to reach some kind of compromise with Russia, an option that smacks of Munich 80 years ago. They claim to be motivated by such common strategic interests as nonproliferation and the fight against terrorism; similarly, under the guise of needing to contain the Soviet Union and stop the spread of communism, Chamberlain reached a deal with Hitler. Now, of course, we know that all attempts to appease the Nazis led the big European powers to feed one country after another to Hitler and, ultimately, led to World War II. (Saakashvili 2014)

Russia as a 'Declining Power'

According to John Mearsheimer

Russia is a declining power and it will only get weaker with time. Even if Russia were a rising power, moreover, it would still make no sense to incorporate Ukraine into NATO. The reason is simple: the United States and its European allies do not consider Ukraine to be a core strategic interest. (Mearsheimer 2014, 88)

Mamuka Tsereteli (2018, 218) claims that 'Russia is a declining power, with poor demographics and a stagnating economy. More importantly, however, Russia is a country with a weak and corrupt government that can offer little to other nations regarding innovation and progress.' According to Alexander J. Motyl (2014, 62):

Russia's rise is illusory and contingent. The society is physically ill (with widespread diseases, high alcohol use, and low life expectancy and birth rates) and, thanks to the imperialist hysteria unleashed by the regime, psychologically unstable, while the state is over-centralized, inefficient, and corrupt. The army is large, but no match

for a world-class power or even probably for the armies of Germany, France, and the United Kingdom . . . The West has serious problems, but Russia is a paper tiger whose roar is bigger than its bite.

George Friedman (2016, and cited in Cornell 2016, 104) dismisses these theses: ‘Russia’s intervention in Syria was not about Syria’. It was motivated in part by saving the Assad regime, but equally by ‘showing that it could’ to the US and to a domestic audience, following being bogged down in Ukraine:

It demonstrated to the United States that it had the ability and will to intrude into areas that the United States regarded as its own area of operations. It changed the perception of Russia as a declining power unable to control Ukraine, to a significant global force. Whether this was true was less important – it needed to appear to be true.

Lest we forget: at the beginning of the 1930s, Germany was a ‘declining power’, and no one believed that at the end of that decade Germany would dominate most of Europe.

A Limited War between Ukraine and Russia

Many commentators have given the Western countries poor marks so far for their crisis management over Ukraine. It is doubtful whether liberal democracies can ever be adept when trying to keep up with fast-moving events. It is in their nature to be distracted, risk-averse and superficial when assessing developing situations, and then to appear to be at a loss when they are caught by surprise. Autocratic governments have a natural advantage, especially when executing a dramatic move for which they have all the capabilities. In the given geopolitical situation Putin was clearly counting on Western weakness in his strategy to disrupt Ukraine.

The Ukraine crisis, which ostensibly started in November 2013 with Yanukovich’s decision not to sign the EU’s offered Association Treaty, gradually escalated, resulting in Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the massive destabilization of Eastern Ukraine. Throughout the period from November 2013 to February 2015, Russia employed a spectrum of escalating destabilization tactics in order to shape the nature and outlook of the political regime in Ukraine, including diplomatic and economic pressure, propaganda campaigns, and low-intensity proxy warfare, including military occupation. These tactics were used in a sequential, but cumulative way; that is, Russia sought to use, expand, and consolidate its influence across all spheres of Ukraine’s domestic and foreign policies, starting with non-violent methods in late 2013 and early 2014, and progressing towards more and more openly used violent tools while maintaining the pressure that non-violent methods deliver.

On 18 March 2015, at a concert devoted to the anniversary of the annexation of the Crimea to Russia, Vladimir Putin (2015, 447) declared:

We in Russia have always believed that the Russians and the Ukrainians are a single people. I still believe it. Surely, extreme nationalism is always harmful and dangerous. I am positive that the Ukrainian people will one day give a worthy and just evaluation of the deeds of those who brought the country to its present condition.

This was a signal sent not only to the Ukrainian nationalists but also to the Russian nationalists. Putin boasted, 'There was not a single armed confrontation in Crimea and no casualties'. However, the lure of even bigger gains tempted him to prove the unprovable, namely his oft-repeated claim that Ukraine simply does not exist.

Between 1993 and 1995, Ukraine–Russia integration followed a very clear pattern: standing apart from Russia's open-ended, comprehensive integration projects but engaging in minimalist and flexible frameworks through bilateral and narrow-scope multilateral free trade agreements. However, Ukraine failed to achieve free trade because Russia was only ready to grant the latter as a stepping-stone towards 'deeper' integration. Then President Kuchma in 2003 signed a treaty for the creation of a 'single economic space' with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. Yushchenko, on the contrary, showed interest in economic integration with the EU. At the same time a Russian newspaper reported that Putin, speaking with George W. Bush, 'very transparently hinted that if Ukraine was accepted into NATO, it would cease to exist' (Mearsheimer 2014, 79).

John Mearsheimer (2014) claims that neither the United States nor its NATO allies were prepared to use force to defend Ukraine. The West instead relied on economic sanctions to coerce Russia into ending its support for the insurrection in eastern Ukraine. Meanwhile, the role of Russian forces within Ukraine became more direct and overt, as the more irregular separatist forces were unable to cope on their own. The conflict became less of an externally sponsored insurgency in eastern Ukraine and more of a limited war between Ukraine and Russia. The costs were high. According to the United Nations, by 8 October 2014 the conflict had claimed 3682 lives and wounded 8871 in eastern Ukraine. Some 5 million people lived in the area affected by conflict. Some 427,000 had fled to neighbouring countries, while a further 402,034 were internally displaced (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2014; these numbers include 298 casualties from Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17). Loshkariov and Sushentsov (2016, 72) write on this issue,

Given these high costs of fighting, there must in theory always exist at least one *ex ante* peaceful bargain that leaves both players better off than if they were to resort to violence. However, players are often unable to reach this deal, meaning that bargaining breaks down and armed conflict occurs. The process is evolving and the situation in Donetsk and Lugansk 'peoples' republic is changing rapidly. Therefore, most comments on all ongoing events in Ukraine and Donbass lack balance and theoretical arguments.

Ukraine has stressed the role of Russia in arming separatist insurgents in the Donbas as a reason for its own use of violence in return. While this factor is without doubt among the central determinants of Ukraine's ongoing and prolonged armed conflict, domestic agency factors and commitment problems between political camps are also helpful in understanding the initial onset of violence. Because a modern, post-imperial Russian nation has not taken shape, there remains a strong constituency for the idea of a big Russian nation and the programme of 'reuniting' the lesser *Little* and *White* Russian branches, the Ukrainian and Belarusian nations.

The adoption of this vision attests to the inability of present-day Russian leadership to abandon the imperial way of thinking and accept the existence of other East Slavic nations.

Conclusion

While the vast majority of the Ukrainian population supported the independence of Ukraine in the December 1991 referendum, in the Eastern and Southern parts of the country, however, support for independence was also economically motivated. Although 83.9% of voters in the Donetsk region supported independence, the people in these regions did not have special sympathy for the Ukrainian nationalism. In the East, the prevailing belief was that the economic power of Ukraine would bring abundance that was deliberately blocked by Moscow, which for decades had exploited Ukrainian agriculture and industry to subsidize the less developed parts of the Soviet Union. On a practical level, opinion polls in 2015 showed that 90% of Ukrainians supported independence and territorial integrity, a figure that once was as low as 56%. Supporters of the EU outnumbered supporters of Russia's Customs Union by 51.4% to 10.5%, and 43.3% favoured NATO membership for Ukraine, versus 33.4% opposed (Wilson 2015, 264). Energy and trade dependency between the two states dropped precipitously. The value of Ukraine's export to Russia decreased threefold between 2014 and 2015 – from \$12 billion to \$4 billion. By the autumn of 2015, Russia's share in Ukraine's trade fell to 18.2%, whereas the EU's grew to 31.5% (WTO Statistics on Ukraine 2015; Dragneva and Wolczuk 2016, 694). Ukraine's half-hearted but repeated engagement with Russian integration projects seems to have misled the Kremlin into believing that this would culminate in a wholehearted commitment to Russia-led integration at some stage in the future. It is perhaps this sense of betrayal, which explains the powerful economic and military backlash from Russia that, ironically, is proving to be counter-productive. Not only has Ukraine's trade dependence on Russia collapsed, but also, and perhaps more importantly, Russia has lost much of what leverage it had over Ukraine. Russia's actions in Ukraine have reverberated more widely and have had a profound impact on Russia's political relations and economic interdependence with the EU and the West in general. Vladimir Putin's allegedly pragmatic and realist actions in Ukraine have only served to forge a stronger, more unified, and more pro-Western identity among Ukrainians. They have guaranteed that Ukraine will never join his most prized project, the planned Eurasian Economic Union, and have instead pushed the country toward the EU. However, a growing European scepticism and Ukraine's inability to fight corruption and introduce reforms decreases the pressure upon the EU to offer a membership perspective. On the other side, if a membership perspective were offered to Ukraine this would provide Brussels with the advantage to press Kyiv to introduce structural reforms to fight corruption and reduce the power and influence of the oligarchs. As Stefan Auer (2015, 968) writes, 'Ukraine has no future without Europe, but Europe also has no future without Ukraine'.

And for Andreas Umland (2017, 261), 'Whether Ukraine enters the EU is no longer a question of if, but instead a question of how and when.'

Ukraine is still facing its worst crisis since becoming independent in December 1991. The military aggression from Russia, which has annexed Crimea and invaded parts of Donbas in eastern Ukraine, threatens its existence as a nation. The intentions of Russian president Putin have an inordinate bearing on Ukraine's future but remain unknown. To stimulate reforms in Ukraine and effectively resolve the ongoing conflict in the east of the country, it is necessary to understand the national identity, interests and values of Ukrainian society, which remain little understood in the West. Russia's revisionist ambitions are only half the equation. Stability in the region is not possible if Ukraine is forced into a subordinate position by Russia. Any externally imposed solution that does not involve the interests of Ukraine as an independent actor will therefore be short-lived.

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