

UKRAINE

Ukraine between Russia and Europe: History Matters

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By:

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Introduction

Ukraine is playing a key role in reformatting the former Soviet space—a role determined by the Ukraine’s potential, geopolitical location, as well as specific features of its history and national identity. History makes its presence felt in every aspect of life in Ukrainian society and has a direct influence on the country’s politics and economy. Most important for present-day Ukraine are its relations with Russia, which can be understood only in a broad historical and cultural context. Failure to appreciate the particularities of that context often produces ill-considered forecasts of Ukraine’s development, as has become especially apparent in the process leading to the annexation of the Crimea by Russia in early 2014 which in turn triggered a pro-Russian separatist insurrection in the eastern border regions of Ukraine.

The histories and identities of Ukraine and Russia overlap, as they developed on the same territory and within the borders of the same empire-like state in the course of the past few centuries. Ukraine has taken on symbolic importance for Russia because important historical events woven into the fabric of Russian nationalism have taken place on its territory. It is becoming evident that today’s aggressive Russian policy towards Ukraine is directly associated with the arrested evolution of the doctrine of Russian nationalism. I shall return to this question below, but it must be pointed out here that the history of Ukraine and the whole region is a true Pandora’s box containing a welter of conflicting concepts and arguments.

Regionalism became one of the challenges facing the project of Ukrainian modern nation- and state-building. As the various regions of what is now Ukraine were incorporated into neighboring states, each of them built up a different record of historical experience.



The territory of the present-day Ukrainian state only took on definite shape in the mid-twentieth century, beginning with Stalin's annexation of western lands seized at various times by Poland, Hungary and Romania, followed by Khrushchev's addition of the Crimean peninsula. Ukraine as it exists today is a product of Soviet nation- and state-building augmented by local ethnic tradition. In the following analysis, I shall dwell on key aspects of Ukrainian history that I consider important for a better understanding of Ukraine's current political situation, with particular attention to Russo-Ukrainian relations. Ukrainian history and the current political situation, in turn, can be understood properly only in a broader geopolitical context.

Between Rus' and Russia

The geopolitical parameters of Ukrainian and Russian history have been determined by the arena in which said histories have been played out—the broad, shifting frontier zone of Eastern Europe. That zone is difficult to discern on the current political map of the world, obscured as it is by the clearly defined borders of nation-states. But those borders were established quite recently, as the Second World War of 1939–45 drew to a close. Until then, they could be described in terms of huge military borderland regions in a state of continual reconfiguration and almost incessant warfare among the states that sought to establish their hegemony in Eastern Europe. That warfare was waged in uncompromising fashion because the belligerent states professed different religions and models of political cultures established on their respective grounds — Orthodox Christian (Muscovite Russia), Catholic Christian (Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, Austria), Protestant (Sweden, Prussia, Transylvania), and Islamic (Turkey and the Crimea). In the nineteenth century, that region became a zone of political

confrontation between the national doctrines of Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism. In the twentieth century, Eastern Europe became an arena of the worldwide conflict between modern Nationalism and Communism. As the twenty-first century begins, it appears to be a bone of content between Western-led and Russian-led models of re-configuration of the former post-Communist space.

Owing to its “fatal geography,” Ukraine has always found itself in the epicenter of geopolitical developments in this frontier zone: whichever power controlled Ukrainian territory became dominant in Eastern Europe. Geography had a direct influence on Ukrainian history: 1) its ethnic territory was long divided and re-distributed between neighboring states; 2) Ukraine emerged as a state on the world map only episodically, as a result of geopolitical cataclysms; 3) successive reconfigurations of its territory often resulted in human catastrophes for the local population; 4) Ukrainian population elaborated a specific culture of survival which resulted in the multiplicity of collective identities. The ethnic boundaries of Ukraine and the names of its territory and population were subject to constant change, creating the impression that with every new reconfiguration of Eastern European space, Ukrainian history began anew.

The confusing terminology pertaining to Eastern Europe and Ukraine requires special attention. The distinction between the words “Rus’” and “Russia” is difficult for the Western reader to grasp. They are indeed similar but differ in meaning. The term “Rus’,” which was brought to Kyiv by Viking conquerors from Scandinavia in the ninth and tenth centuries, was sanctified by the Orthodox Church after the ruling dynasty of Viking descendants accepted Eastern-rite Christianity from Byzantium. After the disintegration of the Kyivan state in the thirteenth century, “Rus’ became a

symbol of religious allegiance and Orthodox traditionalism for ethnic Ukrainians, Russians, and Byelorussians. A few dozen Orthodox polities arose on the regional basis, each calling itself “Rus” and claiming primacy in this symbolic and historical/political space. In particular, the contest between Kyiv and Moscow for the historical legacy of Rus’ went on for more than half a millennium and, in some sense, continues even to the present day. Kyiv, the capital of independent Ukraine, remains the “mother of Russian cities” in the minds of Orthodox Russians.

The historical paths of Kyiv and Moscow parted within the 12th and 16th centuries when the greater portion of the former Rus’ territory, along with Kyiv, was incorporated first into the Lithuanian Great Principality and then into the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; the remainder of the Rus’ realm, together with Moscow, found itself under the suzerainty of the Mongol Golden Horde. Each of these parts of the Orthodox Rus’ formed a distinct type of political culture under the dominant influence of its suzerains: a decentralized order incorporating elements of civil society and European culture in Ukraine, and an absolutist order with elements of Byzantine caesaro-papism and Mongol social and military features in Russia. The elements that they retained in common were the Orthodox religion and historical legacy of Kyiv, as well as peripheral status in Europe. Western cultural influence promoted the modernization of the Orthodox communities of Eastern Europe. Modernization, in turn, was accompanied by a socio-cultural schism: the reform-minded local elite looked to the contemporary West, while the rest of the population kept its gaze fixed on the past.

Polities of various types took shape in the territory of Eastern Europe: the democratic confederation of Poland and Lithuania; the absolutist empires of Muscovy and Turkey; the semi-autonomous satellite states of Moldavia,

Transylvania, Wallachia, and the Crimea; and the borderland military democracies that arose on contested or “no-man’s” lands. The latter included, in particular, the military/political formations of the Cossacks and Tatars that took part in the clashes of dominant powers, occasionally changing sides. In the seventeenth century they were forces to be reckoned with, menacing Moscow, Warsaw and Istanbul at various times. Although these military polities lost their independent political and military significance over time, they left behind potent historical and cultural traditions. Semi-military Cossack formations were revived in Russia and Ukraine in post-Soviet times. Currently, the Russian government employs them to carry out military and police operations in conflict zones.

The seventeenth-century crisis of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth produced a new autonomous military/political formation in the territory of Eastern Europe—the Ukrainian Cossack state of Bohdan Khmelnytsky, which took shape on the basis of the part of Orthodox society that had not been integrated into the Polish-Lithuanian social-political system. The unexpected emergence of the new Cossack polity shifted the balance of power in the region, producing a large-scale international conflict that gradually came to involve almost all of the neighbor states that we know today as Russia, Poland, Turkey, Sweden, Lithuania, Moldova, Hungary, and Romania. As a result of the conflict, the Ukrainian lands were devastated and further partitioned between Russia, Poland, and Turkey. Another result was the incipient decline of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the rise of Russia. Part of Ukraine came under the Muscovite protectorate in 1654 that laid the basis for the later historical myth of “eternal” Russo-Ukrainian unity.

Paradoxically, Ukrainians within the Russian state managed to obtain more rights and liberties than the Russians themselves. They were better educated and more acquainted with Western culture compared



to self-isolated Russian elites, especially the Orthodox clerics. Cossack Ukrainian autonomies remained in existence for almost a century within Russian lands. They gradually lost political significance along with respective regional privileges but retained their ethnocultural particularities. The final effort to revive the international political status of the Cossack state was associated with the name of its leader, Hetman Ivan Mazepa, who went over to the side of Swedish King Karl XII shortly after the outbreak of the Russo-Swedish War of 1700-1721. The sympathies of the Ukrainian population were divided: a minority supported Mazepa, while most sided with Russia. The Battle of Poltava, fought on Ukrainian territory in 1709, swept aside the greatest obstacle to the establishment of Peter I's modern Russian Empire. Sweden suffered a decisive defeat and lost its imperial pretensions forever. The Ukrainian town of Poltava became a symbol of the triumph of Russian military glory. In Russian national tradition, Mazepa's name came to symbolize Ukrainian separatism and treason, while in the modern Ukrainian national narrative it would personify heroic struggle against Russian imperialism.

From the moment they found themselves within the Russian state, politically-minded Ukrainians divided into two basic camps—integrators and separatists. The integrating majority came out for maximum rapprochement with the Russian imperial center. The separatist minority inclined the opposite way, toward the European vector of development. This divide had no particular geographic dimension. It was determined, rather, by educational level and social modernization. The greatest Ukrainian separatists lived in the Westernized capitals of Russia - Moscow and St. Petersburg - while the provinces were indifferent or adopted a pro-Russian orientation. The Ukrainian attitude to Russia was decisively influenced by Westernization and liberalism. A cultural

rapprochement of the two peoples began in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, whenever the Russian regime took the path of self-isolation, Orthodox nationalism and opposition to the West, even moderate Ukrainian supporters of integration were alienated from Russia.

The Ukrainian elites played a notable role in the development of the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century. Born in Ukraine and possessing the advantage of better education, they made brilliant careers in Russia, obtaining high-ranking positions in the new imperial hierarchy—as Church officials, senior ministers, military commanders, rectors and artists. They helped create a new, more contemporary version of Russian national identity, which had been based mainly on the Orthodox religion and the imperial idea. The addition of an ethnocultural component to that short list was a novelty. Thanks to Nikolai Gogol and his contemporaries, Ukrainian themes (Cossackdom, folklore, ethnography) became part of Russian national culture. Ethnic Ukrainians took an active part in fashioning and perfecting the Russian language and literature of their day. As a rule, they all maintained a double identity—local and ethnic on the one hand, Russian Orthodox and imperial on the other. This cultural phenomenon came to be known as “Little Russianism,” and those professing it were referred to as “Little Russians” (malorosy) or “Little Russians” (malorosiiany) contrary to “Great Russians” that considered themselves to be ethnic Russians. Both of them contended for the Rus' historical priority and claimed to be “true” or “real” Rus'.

A smaller group of Ukrainian intellectuals from the so-called counter-elite, descended from less well-off Cossacks, the gentry, the clergy and the peasantry, took a different path from the Little Russians. Instead of assimilating to Russian imperial culture, they began creating

a distinct Ukrainian culture on the basis of the peasantry's simple conversational vernacular and Cossack historical mythology. The poet Taras Shevchenko, who raised writing in the vernacular to the level of serious literature and gave it a radical social orientation, became the symbol of this modern Ukrainian culture. Unlike the Little Russians, the Ukrainians proclaimed themselves to be completely distinct from Russians, seeking to differentiate their history from all-Russian history, to insist on the equality of the Ukrainian language with other languages, and the like. For those very reasons, they came to be known in Russia first as "Mazepists" or separatists, later as "Banderites" (followers of the nationalist leader Stepan Bandera in the mid-20th century) or just "nationalists". This new Ukrainian national identity long remained marginal in a society dominated by Little Russians and those professing local identities.

The process of nation-building in western Ukrainian lands turned out to be even more complex. Those lands were incorporated into the Austrian Empire after the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the late eighteenth century. Their development was long delayed by the lack of a representative elite, rural pauperization and the dominant influence of Polish culture. Polish intellectuals, like Russian ones, freely availed themselves of Ukrainian historical, folkloric and ethnographic material in the process of building a modern Polish nation. Some ethnic Ukrainians (Polonophiles) were involved in that process. Others (Ruthenians) gravitated toward the development of a local identity. The remainder (Russophiles) declared themselves in favor of a pro-Russian cultural and political orientation. In the end, however, victory went to a new, modern Ukrainian identity developed on an ethnocultural basis in the Russian Empire. It began to spread rapidly in the early twentieth century, crossing the Russian-Austrian border and considerably outpacing the crystallization of a Ukrainian national identity in the Russian-ruled lands. The cultural rapprochement of the two parts of

Ukraine divided between Russian and Austrian empires began in the late nineteenth century and remained incomplete even in the 20th century. The same period saw the beginning of mass Ukrainian emigration from the western lands to North and South America, leading to the rise of a Ukrainian diaspora numbering in the millions and active politically.

Aside from eastern (Russian-ruled) and western (Austrian-ruled) Ukraine, another region—New Russia—began to take shape in the late eighteenth century in what is now southeastern Ukraine. That process was associated with Russia's ambitious geopolitical plans for the Black Sea basin. Empress Catherine II reoriented Russian foreign policy from north to south. If Peter I founded St. Petersburg in the north, Catherine II decided to establish a new imperial capital in the south, founding the city of Ekaterinoslav (present-day Dnipropetrovsk in Ukraine). This was to be followed by the annexation of Turkish lands and the revival in that territory of the Byzantine Empire, restoring to Istanbul its former name of Constantinople and enthroning the elder grandson of the Russian empress, who, with appropriate forethought, was given the baptismal name of Constantine. Until the end of the Russian Empire in 1917, the Russian imperial elite continued to be obsessed by the idea of 'liberating' all Orthodox people from Turkey and establishing a "true" Orthodox empire in place of the former Byzantine one.

New Russia was meant to become not only a military springboard for attack on Turkey, but rather a model region of imperial modernity fashioned according to the standards of the European Enlightenment. It was actively populated with colonists from Germany and the Balkan peninsula. New cities were built in the region—Sevastopol, Mykolaiv, Kherson—and it was the Odesa, the most cosmopolitan city of the Russian



Empire after St. Petersburg that became the pearl of New Russia. Its residents included Russians, Ukrainians, Greeks, Italians, Armenians, Poles, Frenchmen and Jews. No wonder Russian nationalists questioned the Russian identity of the city and made every effort to “Russify” it. In general, from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century, New Russia became the showplace of Russian Western-like modernization. Its level of industrialization and urbanization exceeded that of almost every other region of the empire. It was here that political forces emphasizing social rather than national priorities found their greatest degree of support.

Entering the Modern Era

At the dawn of the modern era, Ukrainian society remained divided also by political, religious, social, cultural and linguistic barriers and was little touched by the processes of modernization. The Ukrainian population was composed largely of peasants with a low level of education. From the Russian viewpoint, Little Russia seemed like an exotic periphery of the empire, with abundant natural attractions and rich folklore, settled by provincial simpletons, a “tribe of singers and dancers”—a local branch of the Russian people distinguished by a rustic accent and patriarchal customs. The name “Ukraine,” on the other hand, retained a purely geographic significance in the Russian language. It was used to denote a borderland, an outlying territory rather than a particular region; hence there were several “Ukraines,” all located on the perimeter of the southern and western political borders of the Russian state. Even now, the name “Ukraine” in the Russian language is invariably used with the preposition *na* (on), and not *v* (within), and so the Russian press elucidates events “on the Ukraine [i.e., borderland],” and not “in Ukraine.” Any effort to attribute independent political or even cultural significance to this geographic borderland still

arouses negative emotions among Russians, ranging from skepticism to hostility. The “Little Russian” is “one of us,” while the “Ukrainian” is a “foreigner.” In the Russian Empire, Ukrainian modern language and education in that language were prohibited.

The Russian attitude toward Ukrainians was determined not only by history but also by the specific nature of Russian nationalism, the origins of which lie in the Byzantine religious and political tradition. According to that tradition, the nation, its territory and the rule of the monarch are sacred. “One people, one language, one Church, one Tsar, and one indivisible Rus” – those postulates were and are fundamental for the Orthodox premodern nationalism which arose in confrontation with the West and with Catholicism. Any attempt to rationalize the doctrine, to transfer it to the realm of secular culture, to modernize it, encounters vehement resistance, especially from the Russian Orthodox Church. Consequently, the phenomenon of the Ukrainian modern nation began to threaten the very foundations of Russian identity in its pre-modern, religious interpretation. The existence of Ukraine makes it necessary to divide the sacred territory of the nation as well as its history. Ukrainian efforts to orient *vto* “mother Russia” and explained as nothing but hostile foreign influences emanating first from the Vatican, Warsaw and Vienna, later from Berlin and Washington, and now from Brussels. The Orthodox intellectual tradition remains deeply conservative and suspicious of the imagined “West.”

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Russian Empire, weakened by a series of defeats in the First World War, decided to liquidate the absolute monarchy and separate church from state—a decision that marked the beginning of its end. Defeat in war also brought about the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Ukrainians,

divided by the borders of two former empires, began to consolidate themselves into one modern nation and create a nation-state. Ukrainian sovereignty and shortly after that, independence were proclaimed at the end of 1917 – at the beginning of 1918. However, the Ukrainian nation-state proved unable to maintain its independent status. Once again, as in the 17th century, Eastern Europe was plunged into the maelstrom of a huge geopolitical cataclysm with Ukraine at its center. Ukrainian lands turned into a battlefield and were again fragmented and divided among neighboring states—this time among Soviet Russia, Poland, Hungary, Romania and Czechoslovakia. The efforts of the nation-states that succeeded the Austro-Hungarian Empire to assimilate Ukrainians gave rise to another wave of emigration, as well as to mass resistance, underground military activity, and the growth of Ukrainian integral nationalism, most strongly felt within Poland. The situation in the lands of the former Russian Empire was more complex.

The communists, who came to power in Russia in 1917, actually decided to reestablish the boundaries of the Russian Empire, liquidating the independent nation-states that had arisen in its territory, such as Ukraine and Georgia. To resolve the nationality question, they had two concepts of political order: a Soviet confederate state and a Russian autonomous one. The first concept was Lenin's, the second was Stalin's. The first provided for the existence of Soviet national sovereign republics under the nominal control of a Union center, while the second required national republics to be included into a Russian Federation with rights of autonomy. The competition between these two projects resulted in a political compromise. The Soviet regime recognized the existence of national republics, but only on condition of their total Sovietization. They all retained the outward attributes of national statehood, but in practice they

were reduced to territorial divisions of the one and only Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which concentrated all real political power in its hands. This meant, for example, that the Ukrainian language was permitted and even supported by the state, but everything published in that language had to meet the standards of official Communist ideology and propaganda.

The Great October Socialist Revolution provided the basis for Soviet-Russian (inter) national doctrine. In time, it was displaced by the more nationalistic mythology of the Great Patriotic War. It is no accident that monuments and memorials to the war often arose on the sites of former Orthodox churches and chapels. The Communist Party, which introduced a unique secular religion with its own hierarchy, symbolism, pantheon of eminent figures, and sacral territory, effectively combined the functions of the Russian Orthodox Church and imperial absolutism. The goal of the Soviet leadership was the gradual elimination of national differences and the creation of a fundamentally new Soviet man and nation. What emerged in practice was the symbiosis of a Soviet communist nation with traditional nations. In particular, the Soviet nation was based on the Russian language, culture, and history. In the process, the Russian Orthodox-imperial nation itself seemed to dissolve within the Communist empire, endowing that empire with its capital (Moscow), its communist party, and its language of everyday communication and high culture—all of which took on all-Union, overarching status. Abroad, by force of habit, people kept referring to the multinational Soviet Union as simply “Russia.”

The Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was theoretically a new historical phenomenon. In practice, however, the new symbolism merely served to conceal the old phenomenon of “Little Russianism,” well known from the

times of the Russian Empire. Together with the Russians, ethnic Ukrainian and Belarusian “Little Russians” constituted the so-called Orthodox Slavic core of the USSR. In terms of ethnicity, the territory of the Ukrainian SSR was not a coherent whole. Russian-dominated enclaves appeared in that territory in the form of particular regions (the Crimea, the Donets Basin), state structures (the army, the secret police), and large enterprises of “all-Union” status under the direct control of Moscow.

By contrast, the modern “Ukrainian” national tradition that took shape in the twentieth century was declared subversive and nationalist, and consequently prohibited. Soviet propaganda accused Ukrainian nationalists of collaborationism with Nazi Germany, overtly identifying nationalism with fascism. The traditional designation of “Mazepist” for Ukrainian separatists was now supplanted by “Banderite,” derived from the name of Stepan Bandera. “Banderites” became the common appellation for inhabitants of western Ukraine or Ukrainian nationalists.

Post-Soviet challenges

Paradoxically enough, Soviet Ukrainian statehood was more institutionally complete than that of Russia. The Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, unlike the Russian Federation, had both a capital (Kyiv) and a communist party of its own, which helped preserve the historical continuity and legitimacy of Ukrainian national independence as the USSR disintegrated. Russia, in contrast, was not a national state even within the Soviet Union: it was an empire and could be revived as an empire. The fall of the USSR was not accompanied by the major cataclysms and civil war that might have been expected, considering the huge military potential of the Soviet superpower. One of the greatest surprises, even for specialists, was the peaceful separation of Ukraine from Russia. No excesses were

involved in the transformation of the internal administrative boundaries between these two Soviet republics into external ones. Conflicts began later, when it became apparent that the “separation” of the two “fraternal” republics was taking on an irreversible character.

For an absolute majority of Russians, the fact that Ukraine now existed as an independent state came as an unpleasant surprise, an unnatural and incomprehensible phenomenon. It had become the established view in the USSR that all attributes of the statehood of the Ukrainian SSR were mere window-dressing “for show,” a façade created for the outside observer. No one took them seriously. For that very reason, Stalin secured separate membership in the United Nations for Ukraine, and Khrushchev attached the Crimea to it. What was the sense of holding negotiations about establishing boundaries or dividing property when everything was to be decided “within the family,” among close relatives? When Ukraine declared its independence, it was thought that this would only be for a short time, after which everything would go back to the way it had been before.

As time went on, however, even pro-Russian Ukrainian leaders, having taken power, did not hasten to sacrifice their country’s independence for the sake of an abstract Slavic Orthodox unity. It turned out that Ukrainian independence was not a temporary caprice of fate, a misunderstanding that could and should be corrected. The delimitation of borders between the two states was accompanied by a demarcation of historical legacy, but no true dialogue developed between the two parties.

The first Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, admitted plainly and simply that he did not know what to do with Ukraine. This was said at a time when Russia still appeared to be following a liberal, pro-Western policy course and was attempting to play by international rules. That is why Russia

provided guarantees of territorial integrity to Ukraine within the framework of the Budapest Agreement of 1994, according to which Ukraine agreed to become a non-nuclear state unaligned with any military bloc. That is also why Russia and Ukraine signed a treaty on friendship and cooperation in 1997. At the same time, however, the Russian leadership was developing integrationist projects meant to reestablish Russian dominance in the post-Soviet space. For a long time, such projects could not be implemented because of Russia's weakness.

The second Russian president, Vladimir Putin, for all his Soviet particularity, was already a leader of a different type than Yeltsin. Putin placed his stakes on Orthodox imperial Russian nationalism, not on integration according to Soviet models. Broadly speaking, he chose the Stalinist model of Russian development rather than the Leninist one. In practice, Putin combined Soviet nationalism of the Stalin era (based on the mythology of the Great Patriotic War and imperialism) with Russian Orthodox nationalism of the imperial era. Both doctrines had much in common, especially their anti-Western attitudes, clericalization of domestic policy and aggressive militarism. However, if Russian nationalism had earlier been sacrificed to the Soviet Communist ideology, it now began to be revived in its more traditional form of a military Orthodox empire. Putin made the Russian Orthodox Church one of the main instruments of state policy, restricted democratic rights and liberties, reined in rebellious oligarchs, demonstrated the force of arms and secret police, and thereby won the sympathies of most of the Russian population, which had been brought up in the traditions of the autocratic political culture. For Putin, the disintegration of the USSR was the greatest tragedy of the 20th century, which could and should have been avoided. The regime

created by Putin is mentally associated with the so-called State Committee on the State of Emergency, a group of high-level conservative officials within the Communist Party, the Soviet government, and the KGB who attempted a coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991 to prevent the dissolution of the Soviet Union. But the current Russian regime is oriented less on the Soviet historical legacy than on the revival of the Russian Empire in its most conservative version. President Putin is bald, a trait that has distinguished Soviet reformers from Lenin to Khrushchev and Gorbachev. It would be more appropriate for him to wear a beard, which was the symbol of traditionalist Russian monarchs. More than a beard, however, he needs Ukraine, preferably with Kyiv, the symbol of Orthodox Rus'. Zbigniew Brzezinski was right to say that without Ukraine, Russia has a chance to transform itself from an empire into a nation-state, but as long as it retains Ukraine as a component, Russia is almost doomed to remain an empire.

Like the other former Soviet republics, including Russia, Ukraine began to seek new directions for its development in nationalism. But modern Ukrainian nationalism was and continues to be much weaker than its Russian counterpart. In Andrew Wilson's expression, it is a "minority faith" capable of providing the country with symbols of historical continuity and legitimacy but unable to define its new identity on the level of institutions and a system of values. Ukraine came out of the USSR even more a Soviet republic than Russia. That is why the whole two decades of Ukrainian independence should be considered in the context of the further deterioration of the Soviet system, which has lived as a successful parasite on the idea of national statehood and the imitation of reform.



The first Ukrainian president, Leonid Kravchuk, represented the republic's Communist party establishment and was forced out of office against the background of economic catastrophe. He was succeeded by Leonid Kuchma, a representative of the managerial nomenclature who had previously directed a factory of all-Union status. He managed to stabilize the economic and political situation in Ukraine by transferring power to provincial oligarchic groups, which resulted in mass protests. The wave of the Orange Revolution of 2004, swept into power a former village bookkeeper and romantic Ukrainian patriot, Viktor Yushchenko, only to demonstrate how poorly he was prepared for that role. Finally, in 2010, Yushchenko's main competitor, Viktor Yanukovich, a former Soviet director of a small motor depot with a criminal past, was elected president of Ukraine. The country's political culture declined steadily with the election of every new president: what continued to rise was the criminalization of the ruling regime and the pauperization of the absolute majority of the population, along with the concentration of basic resources in the hands of a small group of oligarchic clans.

Corruption at the highest levels, degradation of the state apparatus and of the army and police, geopolitical maneuvering between East and West in foreign policy and between the Soviet legacy and Ukrainian nationalism in domestic affairs, for lack of a definite strategy and priorities for national development—all of these have been characteristic features of post-Soviet Ukraine. They have distinguished Ukraine both from Russia, with its great-power Orthodox nationalism directed against the West, and from Belarus, which remained completely frozen in the Soviet period. The new Ukrainian elite could continue to follow a course known to itself alone as long as Russia was preoccupied with economic regeneration and the search for a new

imperial identity. Having found it, Russia immediately began to develop growing pretensions with respect to its neighbors in an attempt to re-integrate the Soviet space. Ukraine could counter Russian pressure only by resorting to a Western alternative, but every rapprochement with the West has come up against the obstacles of corruption, legal infractions and the absence of a reform program in Ukraine. The criminalized Soviet elite in Ukraine found room in which to maneuver between Western fatigue and Russian aggressiveness shrinking steadily.

Strongly pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich took many analysts unaware when, to their general surprise, he launched a strong propaganda campaign for bringing Ukraine closer to the European Union. Theoretically, after all, this represented a threat to the corrupt system established in Ukraine. Yanukovich even withstood a trade war with Russia in the course of the few months that remained until the expected signing of an Association Agreement with the EU in Vilnius in November 2013. A week before that event, Yanukovich suddenly shifted the vector of Ukrainian foreign policy toward Russia, obtaining from it considerable economic advantages in return for a promise to enter into an economic union and, prospectively, a political one directed by Russia. We still do not know what motives or arguments prompted him to risk such a hazardous move. It seems that he may have received certain promises or even guarantees of a personal nature from the Kremlin. Nevertheless, this tactic only dismayed political allies and radicalized the opposition. The former automobilist, Mr. Yanukovich made a sudden U-turn but lost control of the ramshackle vehicle...

The opposition's first barricades appeared on Independence Square in central Kyiv. After a few months of negotiations between the authorities and the opposition, in

which European countries took an active mediating role, and at a juncture when political compromise seemed near, at Russian insistence President Yanukovich ventured on a forcible solution to the conflict. For the first time in the history of post-Soviet Ukraine, protest actions led to the deaths of more than a hundred people, with about a thousand more wounded and maimed. The tragic events in Kyiv shocked both Ukrainians and Western observers. No one had expected such a turn of events, after which hope of a peaceful compromise almost vanished.

The confrontation between supporters and opponents of President Yanukovich revealed the depth of the chasm that divided them. On the one hand, it seemed that unprecedented levels of corruption, disregard for law, bribery in the police and the justice system, and general degradation should have alienated an absolute majority of Ukrainians from the regime. It turned out, however, that the regime enjoyed appreciable support among the population of the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, especially those bordering on Russia, where mounting economic and moral degradation were accompanied by growing Russian nationalist influence. In addition to communists and members of post-Soviet business elites, this attitude was also championed by a new generation of Russian Orthodox nationalists that had taken up the cause of struggle against Ukrainian ethnic nationalists. All was forgiven for Yanukovich because of his rapprochement with Moscow, and he was still expected to lend full support to such plans.

On the other hand, Ukraine's continuing drift toward Russia, the insolence and cynicism of the Yanukovich regime, and the country's constant economic decline have radicalized the attitude of Ukrainians and adherents of a European orientation, as was particularly apparent in the western regions of Ukraine. The years of independence had given rise to a new generation of Ukrainian nationalists

whose uncompromising attitude and relative incorruptibility presented an attractive contrast to the amorality and corruption of the Soviet-style elite. A considerable number of them turned out to be radicals prepared for armed conflict. Among Ukrainian intellectuals, voices were raised increasingly in favor of excluding the pro-Russian regions, with the Crimea and the Donets Basin, from Ukraine and for pursuing a more decisive policy of rapprochement with the West. The decision to abort the Association Agreement with the European Union was only the final push toward open confrontation. It had been initiated, however, by developments in the small county town of Vradiivka, where a mass revolt had taken place against the corrupt police.

The events that followed are well known. They resemble the intriguing plot of a political thriller. The revelation of the internal weakness of the Yanukovich regime came as a surprise to many. The radical opposition's show of intransigence proved sufficient to make the president, with his prison experience, feel personally threatened, so, grabbing whatever valuable property he could, Yanukovich fled to Russia where he became a tool of its policy. Power passed into the hands of a moderate Ukrainian opposition that did not expect such a turn of events and proved unprepared for military intervention on the part of Moscow.

Implementing a plan that appears to have been worked out much earlier, President Putin seized control of the Crimea and used local Russian nationalists to legitimize the annexation of the peninsula to Russia. The prospect of actual warfare between Ukraine and Russia came as a shock to many citizens of Ukraine, including Russophones (Little Russians) and ethnic Russians. Brought up in the spirit of Soviet propaganda, they still considered relations between the two peoples to be privileged and fraternal. Putin's policy confronted them with a



choice. By the same token, it effectively accelerated the process of national re-identification along the Russo-Ukrainian cultural boundary. Contemporary Russia, bearing resemblance to both the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire, in reality is a new country that never existed before within its current political borders.

Preliminary Conclusions

As has been the case for centuries, the territory of Ukraine remains at the epicenter of the East-West confrontation. It is becoming ever more apparent that this confrontation did not disappear after the disintegration of the USSR but, on the contrary, is growing more acute. The concept of a “clash of civilizations” is prevailing over notions of the “end of history.” The former Soviet republics have proved unable to overcome the burden of the past and remain hostage to traditionalism, whatever its origins. In twenty years, Ukraine has not managed to create a political nation or to come to terms with the Soviet historical legacy. Given the conditions prevailing today, its fate will probably be decided not in Kyiv but in the capitals of Russia, the United States, and Europe. Ukraine has a chance of maintaining its integrity and obtaining conditions in which to implement reforms only if a broad international consensus prevails.

The Russian leadership now in place has armed itself with an aggressive strategy intended to restore geopolitical control over the post-Soviet space and, perhaps, over the whole region of Eastern Europe. In this regard, Moscow has shown itself prepared to exploit not only economic and informational pressure, as in the past, but subversive tactics carried out by special services and armed intervention as well. Neither the West nor Ukraine has proved ready for such a turn of events. Russia is using the tactic of “creeping aggression” with the aim of turning the

Ukrainian nation-state into a border territory, i.e., several competing “Ukraines” under the control of Moscow. The annexation of the Crimea and the destabilization of the situation in the eastern and southern regions show that this is the real goal of the Russian demand for the federalization of Ukraine.

Acting in this way, Putin aspires not only to satisfy nationalist feelings in Russia and garner political support for himself. He also seeks to eliminate anything but the Russian model for the reorganization of the post-Soviet space. A pro-European Ukraine could theoretically have become the one real alternative to the conservative Soviet-type model of integration that Russia is seeking to carry out in the territory of the former USSR. So far the Ukrainian leadership has not managed to integrate the Russian-speaking population into the “Ukrainian project” and is thus helping to turn it into a geopolitical resource for Putin’s Russia.

At the same time, neither the Chechen wars of the 1990s in the Caucasus nor Russia’s brief war with Georgia in 2008 had such an impact on Ukraine and world—primarily Western—public opinion as Russia’s recent annexation of the Crimean peninsula. For most analysts, Russia’s unprovoked armed aggression against neighboring Ukraine, weakened by the long-term rule of oligarchic clans and the power vacuum after the removal of pro-Russian President Yanukovich from office in early 2014, came as a complete surprise. It was apparent earlier that Russia was trying to subordinate the post-Soviet space to itself and regain its former status of a world superpower, but few expected that it would begin doing so in such a brutal manner, especially in Ukraine whose relations with Russia have always been considered “fraternal.”

It seems like President Putin’s policy towards Ukraine has succeeded with the unforeseen

aftermath. It is helping to annihilate the last remnants of the Soviet system in the neighboring Ukraine in terms of institutions and values and accelerating Ukrainian nation-state building. Ukrainian Soviet-like state structures appeared to be dysfunctional and are now to be transformed into something different. The inclusive Soviet identity has turned into the exclusive Orthodox Russian-Slavic and Ukrainian identities. The real Ukrainian-Russian border is now under construction, which will in turn entail the partition of the borderland territory along with its population, mostly at the expense of Ukraine. Since President Putin forced Ukraine to make a choice between Europe and Russia, both “fraternal” countries have entered the process of final divorce. Its impact on Ukraine, Russia and Europe remains to be seen...

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