Practical and Impractical Knowledge about the Conflict in Ukraine

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The practice of peace-making requires an understanding of the knowledge that legitimizes violence and repression, and makes people unable to stop the processes of conflict escalation. This article looks at two impractical types of knowledge – traditional strategic thinking and Neo-Liberal Institutionalist ideas of cooperation – that clearly seem to be behind some of the escalatory moves in the Ukrainian conflict. The latter started as a dispute about the political orientation of Ukraine between its Russian-minded and Western-minded populations. However, it has now escalated into a dangerous stalemate between various external actors, including Russia and the United States, on the political status of the Crimean Peninsula among other issues. In the conclusion, this article will outline some more practical alternatives to the strategic and Neo-Liberal Institutionalist ways of interpreting the conflict. In general, this article is intended as a neo-pragmatic (Kivimäki, 2012a, 2014) theoretical intervention in the debate on Ukraine rather than as an empirical analysis that could reveal something substantially new about the conflict.

The Traditional Strategic Fallacy

Most processes of conflict escalation are greatly assisted by the idea of deterrence, which influences our opponents' behavior in an externally given, unchangeable conflict setting (game structure). By raising the costs of aggression, we can prevent our opponent from taking violent or unfair actions. This way of looking at war strategy is present in the classical strategic thinking of war and deterrence (Schelling, 1980). In this type of knowledge, our deterrence or punitive action does not change our opponent's perception of our identity or of the relationship between them and us. Robert Cox termed the type of theory that takes the social structure as given and aims at problem-solving from within the structure as *traditionalist*, while he himself subscribed to critical theory, which also maps the alternatives available for the transformation of the structure (Cox, 1981). The approach of this article is critical in the sense that I assume that deterrence affects and defines our identity, and the relationship between our opponent and ourselves. Thus, our violent action becomes the source of the legitimacy of our opponent's punitive and deterring action (which then again legitimizes our further punitive action). In this way, our violence becomes justified by the violence of and threat presented by our opponent; while the violent action or threat from our opponent is the justification of our violence and threat. Strategic action aimed at changing our opponent's conduct – without taking into account this important dynamic – is often the reason why conflict escalates. The problem with this classical strategic mindset is that, on the one hand, it fails to contextualize the action as part of a structure of escalation. In a way, it looks at escalatory moves like a Zen Buddhist looks at "one hand clapping." Furthermore, this classical strategic mindset sees the structure of the conflict game as "given" and "external" to the "players," and thus fails to consider the process of learning about identities and this mutual relationship from these escalatory moves.

In Ukraine, classical strategic knowledge has had a strong impact on the development of the conflict. In the context of a long-term division of the country between those that would like to see Ukraine integrate with the East (Russia) and the West (the EU), radical moves have often sparked political passions, paralyzing demonstrations and sometimes violence. In such a divisive setting, the decision by President Viktor F. Yanukovich on November 21 to walk away from an agreement with the EU and instead seek economic integration with Russia sparked street protests, as

hundreds of thousands of demonstrators felt the country was moving in the wrong direction (Balmforth, 2013). The next move in the process of escalation is a classic example of traditionalist strategic thinking, and it had the same consequences that such action often has. Instead of trying to negotiate with his opponents, the regime securitized its political challengers and labeled them terrorists, which again opened the doors to extraordinary rules for the treatment of political opposition (M. Fisher, 2014). In his effort to show resolve and to deter further demonstrations, President Yanukovych, who felt his position was legitimate due to his democratic credentials as a legally-elected president, eventually used harsh measures against some of the protesters (News & Kiev, 2014). In doing so, President Yanukovych's mindset was strategic. He assumed that the conflicting parties had a fixed identity, and felt that only a new element of threats and punishment had changed in the conflict structure, whilst other elements had remained unchanged. It may be that his violence was exaggerated by the predominantly Western media, which sided with the pro-Western opponents of the president (despite his democratic credentials). Behind the public façade, there were doubts even among Western leaders as to who was the main perpetrator of the violence in the clashes between pro- and anti-Yanukovych demonstrators ("Estonian Foreign Ministry confirms authenticity of leaked call on Kiev snipers," 2014). In any case, violence redefined the identity of Yanukovych and justified drastic, unconstitutional means to remove him from power. It did not only redefine the identity of Yanukovych from that of a legitimate democratic president into a human rights violator, but it also redefined the conflicting coalitions, as Yanukovych's own party turned against him and "threw him under the bus" (M. Fisher, 2014). This was the first step in the escalation of the conflict that was the result of "strategic thinking." According to this approach, the deterrent and punitive action is assumed to work within a stable structure of interaction in which only the costs of the opponent's violence are changed by means of violence and threats thereof.

Instead of learning from the mistakes of the ousted president, the new government started its term by repeating the same mistakes that had brought Yanukovych down. Assuming a fixed, unchanging setting of conflict agents consisting of forces in favor of a pro-western Ukraine and pro-Russian Ukrainians of Russian ethnic origin, the interim President Olexander Turchynov securitized the ethnic Russian community[1] and declared them a threat to national unity ("BBC News – Ukraine crisis: Turchynov warns of 'separatism' risk," 2014). However, by doing this, he legitimised extraordinary action against ethnic Russian Ukrainians. In the name of national unity, the Russian language lost its equal status with the Ukrainian language ("Canceled language law in Ukraine sparks concern among Russian and EU diplomats," 2014). In doing this, the interim government made two associations that had dubious political consequences. On the one hand, it identified the Ukrainian nation with Ukrainian ethnicity. This was possible because of the unfortunate naming of the various ethnicities in Ukraine. Saying that (ethnic) non-Ukrainians are a threat to Ukraine (nation) constitutes a situation where the Ukrainian state belongs exclusively to ethnic Ukrainians. Of course Ukraine belongs to Ukrainians, but it is a political choice to interpret the word "Ukrainians" ethnically. A more democratic interpretation could have been more inclusive, and it could have offered all ethnicities equal ownership of the state of Ukraine. However, the interim president used the fact that the name of the population of the state of Ukraine and the name of the Ukrainian ethnic group are the same in order to create a natural association between the two.

By referring to the "continuing opposition in Ukraine's Russian-speaking regions" ("BBC News – Ukraine crisis: Turchynov warns of 'separatism' risk," 2014) and by suggesting that this constituted an existential threat to the nation, the interim president also associated his own regime, which as we know did not have a democratic mandate directly from the voters of Ukraine, with the state. By doing so, he actually created a reality in which ethnic Russians were no longer part of the loyal Ukrainian people.

The securitization of ethnic Russians, and their exclusion from the concept 'Ukrainians,' could provoke separatism, especially as no efforts were made to criticize the naturalness of the ethnic Ukrainian ownership of the state of Ukraine. The next step in the escalation game[2] was a range of actions whereby ethnic Russians declared their loyalty to Russia, rather than to their own country. The former president of Ukraine appealed for Russian help in stabilizing the situation (Karmanau, 2014). The assumption of the leaders of the Crimean ethnic Russians again was to increase the threat to one's opponent in order to deter that opponent's violent action. But as usual, threats do not influence events within a given setting, but, instead, change the setting. The assumption that ethnic Russians are a threat to the nation was proven by the demonstrative actions of ethnic Russian demonstrators, and it gave the government a reason to mobilize the state against the threat of Russia and Ukraine's pro-Russian population.

At this stage, the conflict also escalated at the international level. The EU and US action in support of the "true Ukrainian voice" (Balmforth, 2013; Foreign Affairs, 2014; Peterson & Crittenden, 2014) helped the naturalization of the ownership of Ukraine (the nation) by Ukrainians (the ethnicity) and the exclusion of other ethnicities. Ethnic Ukrainian ownership of the nation then provoked the separatism of the pro-Russian elements from the state of Ukraine: if the state was no longer theirs, they could no longer have any loyalty to the state.

Russia made the next unreflective move in the process of escalation. In order to stabilize the situation in the Crimea, the Russian Senate approved the use of force in the Crimean peninsula. According to *Russia Today*, Russian intervention was necessary

"since the power was seized in Kiev, the situation has only been deteriorating with radical nationalists rapidly coming to power and threatening the lives of those opposing their actions, most notably the Russian citizens living in Ukraine." ("Russian senators vote to use stabilizing military forces on Ukrainian territory," 2014)

Since Russian intervention was invited by the legal president of the country, the intervention was also seen as legal by the Russians. Furthermore, due to the foreign bases agreement of 1997, Russia already had military forces on the ground, only their use was slightly changed, namely, to stabilize the internal Crimean situation. Finally, because of the fact that the people in danger were ethnic Russians, it was domestically possible for Russia to legitimize the intervention in the name of ethnic solidarity.

Russian power, it was thought by the Russian leaders, would serve to deter violence by the ethno-nationalist government in Kiev and its supporters against the ethnic Russian population. Once again, only the deterrent was intended to change in the conflict setting. Of course, President Vladimir Putin's inability to consider escalatory moves in their interactive contexts led to unintended consequences. Russian intervention proved that Kiev's suspicion of Russia and Ukrainian Russians was justified. Furthermore, it gave legitimacy to the Kiev government to invite further international escalation of the conflict. The fact that Russia claimed the right to protect Russian speakers beyond Russian territory could also escalate relations between host populations and Russian minorities in many other countries: Russian minorities could be viewed as reasons or excuses for foreign meddling in domestic affairs.

The next move by NATO and the United States demonstrated the very same logic of traditional strategic studies. At the time of writing this article, the United States is considering sanctions and possible demonstrative military moves (so far, just military exercises that demonstrate power) against Russia. In this debate, the logic is sadly familiar, being similar to previous escalatory moves. According to Brig. Gen. Kevin Ryan, a retired Army officer who served as defense attaché in the American Embassy in Moscow: "The question is: are those costs big enough to cause Russia not to take advantage of the situation in the Crimea?" Writing in the *New York Times,* Michael McFaul, Former US ambassador to Moscow argues that there "needs to be a serious discussion as soon as possible about economic sanctions so they realize there will be costs… They should know there will be consequences and those should be spelled out before they take further actions" (Baker, 2014). However, again, whilst attempting to make any undesired Russian action costly, the United States will become further demonized in the eyes of Russians, and this will provoke further Russian hostility and action against US interests. To yield to Russian power bargaining would not be useful either as both escalation and de-escalation requires reciprocal moves: the West cannot de-escalate the conflict alone without rewarding aggression.

The Neo-Liberal Institutionalist Alternative

What kind of understanding of the dynamics of de-escalation would we then need for a resolution of the conflict in Ukraine (and elsewhere)? It seems clear that the kind of knowledge that does not see the interconnectedness of escalatory moves, and which does not realize that moves in the escalation process change the conflict structure, are both impractical for achieving conflict resolution. What is needed is a kind of knowledge that reveals the mutual constitution of action and reaction in the process of escalation and de-escalation. Furthermore, awareness is needed about the social structure that both regulates the action, and is constituted by the action. Such knowledge can help the conflicting parties to gain control of the processes of escalation and de-escalation.

De-escalation has to happen in a process where the de-escalatory steps by both parties can only be judged together: compromises are not useful unless they legitimize compromises on the opponent's side. When the Soviet Union crumbled, President Mikhail Gorbachev made his compromises as part of the creation of a Common European Home (Gorbachev, 1989). However, as the Soviet Union collapsed, it turned out that he was unable to demand that the West reciprocate. Russia was left with a suckers' payoff. Instead of building a Common European Home, exclusive military security survived, and NATO expanded to the borders of Russia, now encompassing many former Soviet territories. While American history writing treated this as a victory for the United States over the Soviet Union, Russian political debate tends to focus more on the negotiations between President Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, and forgets the economic collapse of the Soviet Union. Thus, while in the US the ending of the Cold War is generally seen as a victory, in Russia it is seen as a negotiation process in which the Russians were deceived (anonymous Russian diplomat).

Gorbachev's failure is often used in the Russian debate in the same way that the failure of Neville Chamberlain after the Munich Agreement with Hitler in 1938 (Humpreys, 2013) is used in the Western debate: they are seen as moments that show how cold realism trumps idealism. This shows that the dialectical nature of escalation and de-escalation necessarily leads us to prescriptions of reciprocity. Offensive and punitive action is harmful when it leads to an equally punitive action from the opponent. Moreover, when making compromises one should always tie them to corresponding compromises from the other side. This is also the conclusion of the Neo-Liberal Institutionalist analysis of cooperation and conflict. Neo-Liberal Institutionalists suggest that cooperative regimes can be built unilaterally by assuming openly reciprocal strategies of cooperation. Once the opponent realizes this reciprocity, the "shadow of the future" will push it to cooperation: if the opponent cooperates this time around, it can expect cooperation from our side in the next encounter. The opponent has to think not only about the consequences of its actions now, but also the future consequences of its adversary's reciprocal action (Axelrod, 1985, 1986; Keohane, 1986). For example, if the United States makes clear to the Russians that only by cooperating can Russia expect cooperation from the United States, this enforcement of reciprocity can force cooperation in the buildup of non-violent regimes of cooperation, according to Neo-Liberal Institutionalists. The idea of sanctions after Russia's non-cooperation in Ukraine is also part of the logic of promoting cooperation.

However, the Neo-Liberal Institutionalist approach to the evolution of cooperation is based on the simplification that conflicts have the structure of a "prisoner's dilemma." The prisoner's dilemma, again, is a model that only has one cooperative alternative, whereas the problem in Ukraine and in almost any international crisis is not that there is one side that tries to deceive, while the other side tries to foster cooperation and peace. In almost all conflicts, both parties have peaceful, cooperative goals, only different ones. The idea of conflicts being caused by a black-and-white setting of good guys and bad guys, as suggested by Neo-Liberal Institutionalism, has been very destructive as a knowledge-approach to conflicts. It has led to escalation as both conflicting parties see the others' terms of cooperation as deception, and thus have to reciprocate aggressively in order to communicate the message of reciprocity. Thus, Neo-Liberal Institutionalist approach is not any better in the prevention of escalation than the traditionalist strategic knowledge-approach. It, too, leads to uncontrollable escalation. If Russia is simply seen as a deceptive actor, and not as an actor that has an alternative normative interpretation of the situation, it is useful for the interim government of Ukraine to communicate with the United States, a cooperative agent, rather than with the deceptive agent, Russia ("Ukraine prime minister to visit US for crisis talks," 2014). At the same time, if the Ukrainian government is simply an illegitimate deceptive agent, there is no need for the leaders of Crimea's new parliament to communicate with anybody but the Russian government, the agent of cooperation ("Thousands rally against 'illegitimate govt', raise Russian flags in eastern Ukraine," 2014). Instead of negotiating different interpretations of justice the cooperative agent should simply play hardball to impose reciprocity on the deceptive agent (Adomanis, 2014). It is quite easy to see how symmetric Neo-Liberal Institutionalist perspectives on both sides of the conflict constitute a very destructive structure of escalation.

In addition to the problems of Neo-Liberal Institutionalist perspectives on cooperation and conflict, American reciprocity-enforcement works especially poorly against Russia in the Ukrainian case. On the one hand, the Russian interpretation of the history of reciprocation by NATO, with regards to Soviet compromises for the benefit of a Common European Home, do not encourage reciprocal Russian compromises. At that time, Russians felt that compromises were reciprocated by deception. On the other hand, after the war in Kosovo, Iraq, Libya and

Afghanistan, which all were seen by Russia as illegitimate foreign interventions, the United States is not in a good position to enforce a regime of non-intervention. Thus, a more practical theory would be needed for de-escalating this crisis and for the emergence of a peaceful cooperative regime in Ukraine.

A More Pragmatic Approach

In order to prevent any escalation of the conflict, there is a need to see the mutual constitution of escalatory moves. We cannot analyze the "clapping of each hand separately," but instead we will have to see how Russia's aggressive moves legitimize American aggression and *vice versa*. The conflict keeps on producing unintended structural consequences of escalation, until both conflicting parties understand the full responsibility they have for the overall escalation of the conflict.

The honest promotion of reciprocity in the Neo-Liberal Institutionalist manner could produce some peaceful results. It would make it difficult for the Russians to resist intervention in Iraq or Syria, while allowing it in Georgia and Ukraine. An honest implementation of the Neo-Liberal Institutionalist program of promoting cooperation could open the eyes of both Russia and the United States to the diplomatic costs of their own interventions, whenever they are trying to criticize their opponent's interventions. However, the situation will not be helped much by two, or several, sides imposing their own, natural and externally given set of norms that could be the foundation for a peaceful regime of cooperation and conflict resolution. The problem with reciprocity-thinking is that interpretations of normative principles are always open for challenges. This is also the case when both adversaries are promoting the same principle (non-intervention, for example), and especially when they perceive different moral imperatives. This is why dialogue and negotiation with the adversary cannot be avoided. All sides need to see that the solution is a product of dialogue, politics and bargaining.

As long as bargaining about principles of cooperation takes place in the absence of institutional structures of regulation and arbitration, it is likely that demonstrations of will and power will be used in support of arguments. Thus, the less institutionalized the international system is on the global level, the more costs there are for normative bargaining. Western efforts to rescue civilians globally from the threats of terrorism and authoritarianism have shown this, as the share of conflict-related fatalities in anti-terrorist wars and democracy enforcement (in Afghanistan, Iraq, Northern Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen) have increased to almost 70% of total global battle deaths.[3] Furthermore, the effect on democracy of terrorism prevention and of this imposition of the Western War on Terror and democracy enforcement has been meager in terms of democratic progress (Kivimäki, 2012b) or a decline of fatalities caused by terrorism (Kivimäki, 2005). The US imposition of the American interpretation of fairness and morality, just as the Russian imposition of stability and fairness in the Crimea, will not produce stability or fairness. The debate about the moral foundations of peaceful cooperation and coexistence has to be opened up on the level of international institutions. Concern for the global community of civilians or concern for the security of Russian speakers has to be opened up at the level of the United Nations, rather than Russia or the US trying to claim ownership of the promotion of stability and fairness internationally. Owing to this, Heikki Patomäki has suggested that the United Nations should establish a mechanism for dealing with the Ukrainian/Crimean crisis. In absence of a permanent mechanism, an*ad hoc* mechanism should be established (Patomäki, 2014). Yet, in the long run the discrepancy between American and Russian willingness to protect civilians outside their borders and their unwillingness to share ownership in the execution of this protection will have to be resolved. Global solidarity requires global institutions and global legitimacy. International hero agents that resolve other people's problems without allowing a voice to the objects of protection cannot compensate for such institutions.

Conclusions

Knowledge can be a practical or an impractical foundation for action in conflicts. The experiences of the conflict in Ukraine have suggested that in order to be practical, our knowledge of conflicts needs to be informed by the way in which conflict behavior changes the conflict setting and how escalatory moves legitimise the opponent's escalatory moves. The same is true for de-escalation. This is why reciprocity has to be kept in mind both when trying to avoid escalation as well as when trying to de-escalate conflicts. Reciprocity has many interpretations, though. The conflict in Ukraine could be resolved by introducing an ethnic right to protection (so that Russians could come to any country

to protect Russian speakers), the right of coalitions of the willing to impose their vision of universal norms, or many other, much more persuasive cooperative regimes. Peace-making in Ukraine cannot therefore escape politics and bargaining, even if the goal is to establish principles of cooperation that all parties consider legitimate. This is why insistence upon only one set of norms and legality would not be fruitful.

In the long run, it will not be possible to see progress in the creation of common security unless we empower UN-based global institutions, within which political bargaining about cooperative regimes can take place in a more civilized environment of politics and legal debate. Conflict resolution is not an apolitical trick of "getting to 'yes'," as some of the simplistic interpretations of the classical book on conflict resolution by Roger Fisher and William Ury suggest (R. Fisher & Ury, 1991). Instead, conflict resolution always involves bargaining about alternative normative interpretations. For such bargaining, we need global institutions. The world has enough solidarity and willingness to protect communities across borders to build a common global security. We just need to establish common ownership for the project.

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[1] The idea of "securitization" is from the post-structuralist theory of concepts, in which concepts are not just references to realities outside human consciousness, but instead definition of social realities is politics with consequences. To "securitize" means that ethnic Russians were interpreted as an existential threat to Ukaraine and in that interpreting speech act they were moved to the issue area of security, where emergency rules apply (Balzacq, 2010; Wæver, 1995).

[2] Strategic language often uses the metaphor of games, and develops its models as game theory (Schelling, 1980). My use of the same language should not be treated as a normative statement. On the contrary, conflicts that actually kill people should not be treated as games and violence should not be trivialized, and made clinical.

[3] Calculation based on data in (UCDP, 2012)

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