

Ukraine Conflict: An Inflection Point of International Security

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Introduction: A Case for the Global Level of Analysis

On 13 February 2015, Mustafa Nayyem visited the Elliott School of International Affairs to share his story of personal transformation from anti-corruption journalist to Euromaidan protest activist to Ukrainian parliamentarian.¹ The dozen or so avid Ukraine-watchers in attendance witnessed the cool demeanor and frank speech of a man whose country is at war. Nayyem spoke of the Ukraine conflict with raw sincerity and measured fury that notably flared once during the discussion. A Russian audience member asked Nayyem to remark on the “multicultural problem” in the country. His terse reply denying the claim and a flash of nonverbal confrontation reflected a marked divergence of the Russian and Ukrainian positions.

Further questions highlighted the widening scope of the Ukraine conflict that stems from such intensity. A young woman from Turkmenistan inquired how the Ukrainian government aspires to propagate its image to Central Asian states closely watching the crisis unfold for their former Soviet sister. Moreover, a senior German professor requested comment on a still broader issue, positing protest mobilization in Ukraine as guided by and guidance to other revolutionary hotspots around the world. As evidenced by the intellectual discourse of this recent event, the Ukraine conflict clearly incorporates a wide array of actors and processes ranging from individual and intrastate to regional and global.

Such complexity requires a narrowing of focus to draw substantive conclusions on the current situation. The global level of analysis represents a useful framework to examine a key dimension of the Ukraine conflict: the interstate proxy struggle between Russia and the West. Russian involvement in Ukraine poses the greatest threat to European security since the end of the Cold War. The fragility of the latest multilateral ceasefire agreement and a potential shift in U.S. policy toward arming Ukraine show the urgent need to better understand the global causes and effects of the conflict.

These developments drive the following essay. The first section provides a brief historical overview of the dispute. The second and third sections present competing narratives of the conflict parties including Ukraine, Russia, United States, and European Union. The final section assesses the primary and secondary drivers of the conflict to highlight the relevance of war in Ukraine to the world. Ultimately, the Ukraine conflict is an inflection point of international security with an irredentist Russia acting aggressively to overhaul the Western-dominated post-Cold War world order.

Historical Overview of the Ukraine Conflict

Like many former Communist bloc countries, Ukraine inherited numerous geopolitical, economic, and social problems after the fall of the Soviet Union. Despite a few early successes, particularly nuclear disarmament spearheaded by American and Russian leaders, government corruption and economic stagnation put the nation on an obstacle-laden course toward a more transparent and efficient system. Greater integration with Europe away from Russia proved to be a divisive issue in society as well. In 2004, widespread election fraud sparked the Orange

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Revolution. After several weeks of protests, an EU-mediated revote hastened in pro-Western politicians Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko.² But political infighting coupled with the global financial crisis fostered much public disapproval for the new government. Pro-Russian leader Viktor Yanukovich rode this wave of resentment into office in 2010. He gradually reoriented East and instituted more authoritarian policies that strengthened the executive office, manipulated rule of law, and limited free speech.³ This context set the stage for the breakout of the current conflict.

In November 2013, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign a highly anticipated association agreement with the European Union, turning instead toward closer cooperation with Russia. This sudden turn of events ignited opposition in Kiev, producing the Euromaidan movement. Russian President Vladimir Putin's offer of economic support and reduced energy prices added fuel to the flames. Hundreds of thousands of demonstrators rallied at Independence Square to call for greater integration with the West. By February 2014, the protests turned violent as clashes with police killed 88 people in 48 hours.⁴ The Ukrainian Parliament subsequently ousted Yanukovich from power, who fled the country amidst the escalation, and announced new presidential elections for May.

The conflict escalated further from this point onward. In retaliation, Russia began a campaign of hybrid warfare to destabilize the new Ukrainian political landscape. Pro-Russian gunmen, admitted later to have been Russian special forces, seized critical infrastructure on the southern peninsula of Ukraine, culminating in the Russian annexation of Crimea in March 2014.⁵ The United States and European Union imposed sanctions in response. Unrest proceeded to spread into eastern Ukraine where pro-Russian separatists claimed territory in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts. Following the election of new Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, the Kiev government mobilized for war, deploying military forces and volunteer battalions on an "Anti-Terrorism Operation" against the rebels. Though consistently denied by Putin, Russian troops and supplies flowed into the conflict zone.⁶

The recent ceasefire builds on a major multilateral agreement signed in Minsk in September 2014. Unfortunately, key unresolved issues then, such as vague guarantees of autonomy for the eastern regions, meant fighting would inevitably continue unabated. Violence escalated once again around Donetsk airport and the strategic town of Debaltseve late last year, requiring whirlwind diplomacy on the part of Western and Russian officials.⁷ In a conflict that has tragically claimed over 6,000 lives, including the shooting down of a civilian airliner in July 2014, the latest deal, though tenuous at best, represents a final push for peace.⁸ Overall, this brief historical overview serves as a useful foundation for more detailed discussion at the global level of analysis on the Ukraine conflict in the next few sections.

Russian Narrative on the Ukraine Conflict

On 12 February 2007, Russian President Vladimir Putin took the stage at the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy to outline his views of the post-Cold War world order. His historic speech dismissed the notion of a unipolar system, criticized the hyper use of force in international relations, and lambasted the expansion of the European Union, NATO, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Putin clearly hurled the majority of his accusations at the West, particularly the United States:

"We are seeing a greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law. And independent legal norms are, as a matter of fact, coming increasingly closer to one state's legal system. One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this?"⁹

This bold claim captures Putin's burgeoning interpretation of a Western-dominated post-Cold War world order and informs the Russian narrative on the conflict in Ukraine.

From the steeples of the Kremlin, the Ukraine crisis embodies yet another security threat that the West poses to the stability of the Putin regime in Russia. In May 2014, Russian defense officials concluded at the Moscow Conference

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on International Security that various color revolutions across the former Soviet sphere in recent years are a form of Western warfare mainly targeting Russia.¹⁰ Putin further frames Russia as “a front-rank player in a global clash of values, championing Eurasia ostensibly on a platform of social conservatism, tradition, religion, and a focus on state authority to generate social stability.”¹¹ The Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine represents the latest offensive expansion by Western institutions in the form of U.S.-funded NATO and the European Union to the detriment of Russian national security. Top political pundits in Russia even posited that the CIA fomented the grassroots unrest that led to an illegal coup d'état against the legitimate government of the democratically elected former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich.¹² This allegation fits the Russian narrative of the West imposing its norms and policies on other nations.

After the unconstitutional ousting of Yanukovich, Putin branded the new government in Kiev as a junta consisting of militant Ukrainian ultranationalists. These radical extremists now in power purportedly threatened the livelihood of Russian-speaking minorities in Ukraine, thus necessitating Russian intervention in Crimea under the guise of self-defense forces.¹³ Conflict resolution specialist Edward Azar provides a useful theoretical explanation for this action.¹⁴ In Protracted Social Conflict (PSC), developing in the Ukraine case, certain features are particularly salient. First, the identity group serves as the unit of analysis, and second, patterns of international linkage influence conflict. Additionally, the deprivation of human needs and role of governance are critical factors. Present in these circumstances, Russia identifies with Russian-speaking minorities in Ukraine, an international linkage that spans centuries to the current day, particularly colored by shared Soviet legacy. The revolutionary Ukrainian government appears poised to deprive basic freedoms such as language rights, so Russia deploys military forces to protect victimized Russian-speaking populations in its near abroad. In a free and fair referendum, over 97% cast a vote in support of rejoining Russia. Putin respects the democratic wishes of his co-ethnics and absorbs the territory. This narrative of identity explicated here via Azar's theory proves to be highly important in the Ukraine conflict.

The annexation of Crimea did far more than defend Russians abroad; the intervention greatly impacted domestic politics in Russia as well. Putin and the majority of Russian people viewed the reintegration of Crimea into Russia as correcting an historical injustice. The nationalist camp propagated what Vamik Volkan describes as a chosen trauma.¹⁵ Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's transfer of Crimea to the Ukrainian Union Republic in 1954 was a shared wrong for the Russian people that Putin finally corrected.¹⁶ Thus, his popularity soared with domestic approval holding steady at 82%-86% over the past several months.¹⁷ Even more revealing, about 44% of the population believed Russia had returned to a place of greater respect in the world, a double-digit increase from two years ago.¹⁸ An extreme dose of positive self-imagery was injected into the Russian narrative.

According to Moscow, civil unrest then arose across eastern Ukraine in response to the dangerous junta in Kiev. Peaceful anti-Maidan protests for greater autonomy turned into a homegrown separatist movement with no alternative but to fight after attacks by radical right-wing Ukrainian organizations like Right Sector.¹⁹ Putin reserved the right to intervene to protect his compatriots in Ukraine amid the lawlessness. By Spring 2014, pro-Russian activists created the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic under the united banner of Novorossiia, “New Russia,” which notably encompasses all of southeast Ukraine.²⁰ The illegitimate Ukrainian state declared war in retaliation and patriotic volunteers from Russia traveled to assist the rebel forces. Violent conflict ensued with Ukrainian extremist battalions indiscriminately shelling civilian areas. Putin continues to advocate on behalf of the people of Novorossiia, staunching the humanitarian crisis with aid convoys and refugee admission as well as negotiating a just peace for federalization of the regions. This role as honest broker caps off the Russian narrative on the Ukraine conflict.

Western Narrative on the Ukraine Conflict

The Western bloc including the United States, European Union, and elected government of Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko characterize the conflict as a struggle between Russia and Ukraine hastening in a new Cold War. Conflict resolution specialists Dean G. Pruitt and Sung Hee Kim provide theoretical insight into such a framing of this case through the application of their Aggressor-Defender Model.²¹ The West views Russia as an aggressor threatening the security of the European periphery such as the Baltic members of the NATO defensive alliance. Russian President Vladimir Putin covertly deployed thousands of military and intelligence personnel to incite rebellion

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on the Crimean peninsula and in eastern Ukraine. Despite the alleged political justifications, his annexation of Crimea completely lacked any legal foundation under international law.²² The move was deemed a blatant land grab impinging on Ukrainian sovereignty and placing Ukraine into a defensive position. In short, Russia is the aggressor against the defender West.

Western media largely demonizes Putin for his consistent denials of Russian involvement in Ukraine. An “evil-ruler enemy image” surrounds his cult of personality.²³ Many Westerners believe that the Russian people are brainwashed by the massive nationalist propaganda machine administered by the state. Putin is judged to be a brilliant, ruthless tactician with total control over his country. American scholars like John J. Mearsheimer²⁴ and Stephen F. Cohen²⁵ are labeled “Putin apologists” for taking up the case for Putin that suggests the West provoked Russian aggression. With falling energy prices, biting sanctions, and potential U.S. arming of Ukraine, the West hopefully expects higher costs for continued destabilization of Ukraine to unhinge the Russian economy, eroding domestic support and pressuring a Putin regime still frightened by a repeat of the 2011-2012 Bolotnaya protests.

Belief in the idealistic post-Cold War world order underlies the Western narrative on the Ukraine conflict. The Soviet Union is a beast of the past; democracy won the decades-long ideological battle. The West seeks to promote freedom and prosperity around the world with each country able to dictate its own political path. A large majority of Ukrainians chose to reorient West and ousted former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich for his snub to Europe. Their revolution embodied a central feature of the democratic process. The West desires three main elements of the Kantian nature for Ukraine: democratic institution building, fair governance, and European integration.²⁶ The new Ukrainian government, consisting of pragmatic reformers not minority-oppressing right-wing radicals whose parties won only 2% support in parliamentary elections,²⁷ are entrusted with these tasks. In sum, the West blames Russia for undermining Ukraine’s pursuit of a more efficient and transparent system through European integration as well as challenging the post-Cold War world order.

Primary and Secondary Drivers of the Ukraine Conflict

The competing narratives of the conflict parties readily cloud analyses of the Ukraine conflict. Cutting through the political rhetoric to ascertain the motives behind state policy actions is a tall order amid the widespread information war. But scholars and practitioners must comprehend these competing narratives in order to stretch beyond incomplete conflict assessments only considering rational geopolitical calculations. Identity markers including culture, history, nationality, ethnicity, and language also prove to be extremely relevant. With this in mind, the following section aims to provide a concise, comprehensive analysis of the primary and secondary drivers of the Ukraine conflict from the global perspective.

Russia primarily intervened in Ukraine for two mutually reinforcing reasons. First, Russian President Vladimir Putin wished to consolidate his regime in a political environment rocked by massive opposition only a few years prior. A democratic revolution in a neighboring country with historically close political and cultural ties to Russia posed too great a challenge to the system. The new Ukrainian state had to be destabilized to sustain leverage against this dangerous shift to the West. Championing identity markers in state-controlled media to justify military force in Ukraine effectively shored up domestic approval and anti-Western sentiment.

Second, Putin and the Russian people share a drive to restore the great power status of Russia in the face of a perceived threat from the West. Securing respect in their claimed sphere of influence and the post-Cold War world order is critical. The annexation of Crimea sent a clear message to the international community. Seizing military bases crucial for projecting power in the Black Sea region was of secondary significance. Further foreign policy decisions such as the Eurasian Economic Union integration project,²⁸ networking with authoritarian regimes like Syria, Iran, Egypt, and China,²⁹ and soft power operations to woo far-right and far-left parties in Europe³⁰ show the primary intent of Putin to counter the normative hegemony of the West.

By exploiting such doctrines as Responsibility to Protect (R2P),³¹ Russia blatantly challenges the Western monopoly on codifying international law, which resonates as an overhaul of the post-Cold War world order. Through Ukraine, the West primarily aims to reassert the legitimacy of international norms touting democratic institutions, fair

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governance, and stable market economies. Even with a Western-leaning government in power, most analysts agree that the Ukrainian political landscape still faces a long road ahead to weed out the rampant corruption endemic in the system. War, not reform, is the most pressing priority at this time. Furthermore, Western officials view the Ukraine conflict as a necessary proxy struggle to stymie Russian hybrid warfare from spreading to NATO border countries, which would potentially invoke a decision on Article V, (i.e., an attack on one is an attack on all). Secondly, the European Union remains committed to rebalancing essential and lucrative business ties with Russia, particularly in the energy sector.³² Economic interdependence further complicates the permissible magnitude of diplomatic pressure. Ultimately, the divergence of interests between Russia and the West in the Ukraine conflict rests principally on the normative level.

Conclusion: International Security Going Forward

In June 2014, Russian and American experts convened in Boisto, Finland to draft a “24-Step Plan to Resolve the Ukraine Crisis.” The group shared the following observation in their open letter about the meeting:

“We categorically oppose the non-Ukrainians in this initiative, because it plays to the worst instincts of domination by Russia and perhaps also by America. It turns out that Ukraine is not really an independent country, and Russia may, in agreement with the United States, determine her fate.”³³

This assertion captures the destabilizing role that international linkages may play in the conflict. It demands further academic study at the global level of analysis to ascertain how Russia and the West may reconcile their differences and support a sustainable Ukrainian solution to the conflict. As the United States deliberates over arming Ukraine, the recent ceasefire agreement represents a final push for peace to avoid a potential escalation of violence.

Over the last year, Russia has consistently escalated the crisis to new thresholds with reverberations around the world. The annexation of Crimea and subversion of eastern Ukraine pose the most direct challenge to the Western-dominated post-Cold War world order since the fall of the Soviet Union. Russian intervention based on co-ethnic defense sets a dangerous precedent that risks provoking conflict in other former Soviet countries and beyond. Russian President Vladimir Putin strives to consolidate a normative alternative championed by Russia in opposition to democratic norms increasingly perceived as less legitimate and attractive by many nations.³⁴ Ultimately, the Ukraine conflict embodies this overhaul of global rules for the great game, an inflection point of international security with ripples for years to come.

Endnotes

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