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Ukraine and the Russian Challenge to the European Order

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TARAS KUZIO AND PAUL D'ANIERI, JUN 13 2018

This is an excerpt from *The Sources of Russia's Great Power Politics: Ukraine and the Challenge to the European Order*. Download your free copy [here](#).

Russia's seizure of Crimea and prosecution of hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine prompted scholars, analysts, and policy-makers around the world to ask why it happened, what it means for international security in the region and beyond, and how the conflict might be ended or at least managed. Those three questions are inevitably linked. We have written this book to fill what we see as important gaps in the literature, beginning with the question of why the war happened. We contend that the roots of the crisis go back further than is widely understood and therefore we see the cause of the conflict in long-term factors underlying Russia's policy toward Ukraine. We trace Russia's goals and tactics from the beginning of the post-Soviet era in 1991, and in some cases to the Soviet era. Rather than focusing on historical breaks, we stress the continuity between the Soviet era, the early post-Soviet era, and the crisis since early 2014. The key break was that Russia, in pursuing goals that it held since 1991, chose to use military force in 2014.

Therefore, we contend that Russia's actions in 2014 were not a response to specific events, such as NATO enlargement, EU policy, democracy promotion or revolution in Ukraine because the main drivers of Russian policy were visible *prior* to those events. The events of 2013–2014 in Ukraine certainly spurred resentment, and may have created a sense that a window of opportunity was closing, but they created neither Russia's desire to regain Ukrainian territory nor the tactics that would be used in doing so.

Analysts have sought to define and characterise Russia's tactics as a new kind of 'hybrid warfare'. Except for using the most recent technology, we argue, there is not much new about Russian hybrid warfare. Rather, it shows considerable continuity with both the goals and tactics that the Soviet intelligence services used during the Cold War and that Russia deployed in military interventions from 1991 onwards in Moldova and Georgia. Our focus is not on Putin's personal history in the Committee for State Security (KGB) and its successor, but on the endurance of norms, practices, and institutions from the Soviet to the post-Soviet era to the present.

If the conflict has somewhat different roots than many identify, what are the implications for resolving it? Our conclusions are unfortunately pessimistic. The crisis has exposed a fundamental disagreement over what a European order should look like. The European Union (EU) remains wedded to principles that both stress the sovereign equality of large and small states and reject the use of force. Russia seeks recognition of a Russian 'sphere of influence' beyond its borders and stresses that Russia as a great power is entitled to a veto over what happens in the region.

Whether or not the West should accept Russia's claim has been a main topic of discussion, and here again we believe some important perspectives have been missing. Most importantly, *realism* has been influentially invoked to explain how the war started (the West did not respect Russia's sphere of influence) and to suggest how the conflict might be stabilised (accept a Russian sphere in Ukraine and perhaps elsewhere).

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Our critique focuses not on the broad question of when *realpolitik* should and should not trump principle, but on how realism applies to this conflict. Put simply, it is not at all clear that realism would find the causes of the conflict in Western action nor would it find the solution in acquiescing to a Russian sphere of influence in Ukraine. It might just as easily claim the opposite. Some of the most prominent applications of realism to the Ukraine-Russia crisis contradict basic tenets of realist theory. We show that realist theory fits equally well, if not better, with a policy of opposing the expansion of Russian influence. Applying realism to reach specific conclusions about this case relies crucially on additional assumptions, most importantly concerning Russia's aims.

The book proceeds as follows. Chapter one reviews existing literature on the conflict, identifying different schools of thought on why Russia annexed the Crimea and launched military aggression against Ukraine in 2014. We argue that realism has been applied to the case in a way that does not seem realist at all. We also identify the major gaps that we address in the following chapters, particularly the need to look more deeply into the early post-Soviet era and at the role of Ukraine in Russian national identity.

Chapter two traces the evolution of hybrid war from Soviet to post-Soviet Russia. While cyber warfare is based on fundamentally new technology, the tactics of *dezinformatsiya* (disinformation) and *maskirovka* (military deception) have a long history. We point out the similarity in rhetoric used by the Soviet Union and Russia against the goals and policies of the Ukrainian national movement.

Chapter three addresses Ukraine's relations with Russia from 1991 to 2013, highlighting that Russia sought to control Ukraine from the very beginning, that it sought greater control over Crimea in particular, and that these goals were rooted in claims about the very essence of Russian national identity.

Chapter four examines the conflict in Crimea and Donbas, beginning with the Orange Revolution in 2004. The chapter shows both the medium-term build up to the conflict and the application of specific Russian tactics in 2014.

Chapter five surveys the international repercussions of the crisis and international efforts to resolve it. Like many others, we are pessimistic because we see little common ground between Russia, Ukraine and the West over either principles or territory. Russia's position seems to require that the West acquiesce to a territorial division that establishes a Russian 'sphere of influence'. In the EU, sensitivities about a 'new Yalta' will make that very hard to accept.

A brief conclusion then poses several questions that remain unanswered. Even if the West is willing to accept a territorial concession to Russia, can we assume that Russia will be satisfied and that security would be assured? If the roots of Russian aggression in Ukraine are deep, as we believe, then is it likely that the passing of President Vladimir Putin or a new resurgence of democracy in Russia would change Russian policy? Perhaps not, especially towards Crimea.

Having written this book in the belief that important questions have been overlooked and important perspectives neglected, we make no claim to have addressed all of them. We do hope to have raised issues that will stimulate productive discussion. If this new Cold War is anything like the original one, the debates will continue for some time.

About the author:

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