

# Causes and Potential Solutions to the Ukraine and Russia Conflict

Written by Taras Kuzio and Paul D'Anieri

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TARAS KUZIO AND PAUL D'ANIERI, JUN 27 2020

**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 on E-International Relations**

Disagreement continues over both the causes and potential solutions to the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. We use the word 'solutions' carefully, because there is little prospect for re-establishing the level of confidence or the norms that prevailed prior to 2014. In this brief conclusion, we set out some of the key findings of the book, and pursue their implications for the future. First, this book has differed from many others in its understanding of the timeline of the conflict. The conflict that emerged in 2014 had its roots at the very outset of the post-Cold War period, because from the very beginning, Russia sought to prevent Ukraine's independence and, when this was unavoidable, sought to limit it both in terms of sovereignty and territory. As Angela Stent astutely points out, 'Every U.S. president since 1992 has come into office believing that, unlike his predecessor, he will be able to forge and sustain a new, improved relationship with Russia.... Yet each reset has ended in disappointment on both sides'.<sup>[1]</sup> Similarly, structural problems undermine efforts at re-setting Ukrainian-Russian relations; even the most pro-Russian Ukrainian presidents (Kuchma and Yanukovich) struggled to find a stable accommodation with Russia.

In terms of national identity and tactics, the story begins even earlier. As chapter two demonstrated, the approach to information warfare and the use of unconventional tactics ('active measures') has deep roots in the Soviet era, even if the specific tactics of cyber warfare have taken advantage of contemporary technology. The spread of disinformation, brazen lying, 'whataboutism',<sup>[2]</sup> and targeted violence were all tactics used by the Soviet Union, particularly in its long-running battle against the Ukrainian independence movement. As chapter three showed, Russia's conception of its national identity – including the view that Russians and Ukrainians are one people – has sources going back centuries.

This is not to say that military conflict was inevitable, or that the events of 2013–2014 did not provide both added incentive and opportunity for Russia to use force. But it does indicate that the desire to revise the territorial arrangement in Ukraine did not emerge in response to NATO or EU enlargement. While those developments undoubtedly were seen as dangerous to Russian interests, Russian interest in controlling Ukraine predates them.

Looking forward, this interpretation has important implications. While the nature of Putin's regime helps explain the decision to intervene in Ukraine in 2014, the notion that Ukraine is in part or entirely Russian territory is not limited to Putin or to a narrow slice of the Russian elite. To the extent that the Russian creation myth centres on events in Kievan Rus, and to the extent that the territorial expansion under Catherine the Great is seen as the basis for *NovoRossiya*, it would appear that Russia's territorial aspirations in Ukraine have not been satisfied. The effort to promote further separatism in *NovoRossiya* in 2014 indicated that had the opportunity existed, a much larger slice of Ukrainian territory might have come under the sway of Russian proxies.

This leads us to a second important conclusion, which is that realist analysis, while it contributes much to understanding the dynamics of conflict, does not yield a clear policy recommendation without the help of further assumptions. The most prominent realist analysis of the conflict, that of Mearsheimer, is based on the assumption

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that Russia was a defensive power, protecting the status quo. To the extent that this assumption is true, the West's acceptance of that status quo might be seen as the basis for a stable peace going forward.

However, the assumption that Russia seeks further revision of the status quo is equally plausible. Territorially, the *NovoRossiya* probe, threats against the Baltic States, and continuing pressure on the front lines in the Donbas indicate that Russia might take more territory if it can do so. Just as few expected Russia to seize Crimea in 2014 despite its long record of claiming the territory, we should perhaps take Russia's hints about Kiev and Novorossiia seriously. Put differently, having revised slightly the territorial status quo of 1991, will Russia be satisfied that this status quo still leaves the western boundary of its influence far to the East of where it was from 1945 to 1989, and leaves Odesa and Kiev beyond its control? Leaving aside the question of whether Russia is satiated territorially, it clearly seeks revision of the norms that Europe and the US presume have underpinned the security of Europe since 1989, two of which are that states' choices of institutional affiliations cannot be vetoed by third parties and that borders will not be changed by force.[3]

Therefore, depending on whether we believe Russia is or is not satisfied with the status quo, realism points the West to opposite strategies. If Russia is satisfied with Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, then the West can aid its own security by acquiescing to these gains and thus making Russia less aggressive. But if Russia is not satisfied, then realism, as it traditionally has done, would counsel that power be met with power. The most basic realist argument is that force is the ultimate determinant of outcomes, so if there is no agreement on the dividing line between Russia's sphere and the West, then it will be determined by the use or threat of force. In this view, the best way to prevent conflict is to deter it with the threat of force.

Clearly, the West erred in believing that Russia could be satisfied with a Ukraine integrated into Western institutions. But, it remains unclear what Russia would be satisfied with. Russian leaders themselves may disagree, and they may not even have a fixed idea. Just as the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO was not on the West's radar screen in 1991, Russia's notion of where its sphere of interest might end could well be determined as much by opportunity as by some pre-determined notion. As hard as it is to assess intentions looking backwards (scholars still disagree on what motivated Soviet policy during the Cold War), it will be even harder to assess them looking into the future. As a result, we should continue to expect that policy recommendations toward the Ukraine-Russia conflict reflect the authors' assumptions as much as any analysis that comes from those assumptions.

A third conclusion is that the conflict will not be easy to resolve. Repeated attempts at ceasefires have not lasted more than a day, and a proposal by Ukraine to invite UN peacekeepers into the Donbas has been blocked by Russia.[4] Russia's own proposal for peacekeepers was rejected by Ukraine and the US over the fundamental question of where to station them. Ukraine and the US seek to have peacekeepers on the internationally recognised Russian-Ukrainian border while Russia proposed that they be based on the ceasefire line. Putin's proposal therefore resembled earlier proposals during Yeltsin's presidency when 'CIS' (read Russian) peacekeepers froze conflicts that Russian proxies had won on the ceasefire line in the Trans-Dniestr, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Perhaps, rather than thinking of how to resolve the conflict, we should be thinking about how to manage it. It is in this respect that the analogy with the Cold War might be most fruitful. While discussions on both sides about winning the Cold War never ceased, over time increasing attention was paid to managing the conflict to minimize the danger of it spinning out of control.

The conflict is unlikely to be resolved for two reasons. First, the various sides' understandings of the sources of the conflict and the acceptable solutions remain far apart. Even though many in the West recognise that Russia is extremely unlikely to reverse its annexation of Crimea, and are prepared to accept that, recognising it officially and legitimising it will be much more difficult. That is even more true for the government of Ukraine. Assuming the territory is not to return to Ukraine, finding a way to legitimise Russia's annexation will be necessary for a complete resolution of the conflict, and it does not appear that many in the West or in Ukraine are near to finding that acceptable, in part because doing so might set a dangerous precedent. Second, the damage done to various relationships cannot easily be undone, even if there were the desire to do so (and that itself is questionable).

The assumption after 1991 that a harmony of interests had largely replaced conflict of interest in the West's relations

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with Russia helped smooth over a large number of disagreements. Now, the assumption that the two sides are adversaries again undermines cooperation. Trust is at a minimum and bad faith is widely assumed, undermining the conditions to even search for common interests. Moreover, in the US and Russia (and perhaps in other countries as well), domestic politics rewards an adversarial stance toward the other. Especially after Russia's influence campaign in the 2016 presidential election, it will be very difficult for a US administration to be seen as making deals with Russia. For much of the Cold War, attempting to deal constructively with Russia led to accusations of naiveté or 'softness'. Today it is likely to lead to allegations of treason.

This increased level of hostility means that even if a deal were brokered to recognise a new status quo including Russian sovereignty over Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, neither Russia's relations with the West nor Ukraine could return to the antebellum state of confidence, low as that was. Western governments would have to continue to live under the new assumption that military action is now part of relations among these countries.

The fundamental consequence of Russia's intervention in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine is that the 'state of war' now prevails again in Europe, in Hobbes' sense that war is 'on the table' even if not actively underway. Even if those who believed that war had been eliminated from European international relations were naïve, that viewpoint had a powerful effect on the nature of relations between the West and Russia, and hence on Ukraine. That confidence could potentially have become as powerful as that between Germany and France, where the belief that war is impossible helps make it so. Instead, we are seeing the re-militarising of relations between East and West.

This discussion of conclusions belies the reality that at this point we have far more questions than answers about the evolving nature of relations between the West, Russia, and Ukraine. Here we point to two related crucial questions. First, how will the regimes in Russia and Ukraine develop, and second, how will that affect their relationships with each other and the West.

While Russia appears to be in a period of international ascendance, most observers believe that it is fragile domestically. The economy continues to depend heavily on natural resources and to be plagued by corruption and crony capitalism. The political system has become increasingly personalised, leading to the question of whether it can survive beyond Putin himself. We simply do not know. Nor do we know what might replace Putinism.

Ukraine's future is also uncertain. After two ostensibly democratic revolutions, the country's oligarch-driven politics appear remarkably unchanged. The contest among oligarchic groups for power and access to the benefits of corruption and rent-seeking drives the political system. Sustained Western support for reform after the Orange Revolution produced few reforms and no structural change. Following the Euromaidan, economic, fiscal and energy reforms have made headway but Ukraine continues to be characterised by oligarchic influence on the economy and media, limited progress in transforming Ukraine into a rule of law state and the slow fight against high-level corruption. As a result, the country remains poor and susceptible to Russian penetration and influence and reliant on Western financial support. Poroshenko continues in a long line of Ukrainian presidents to support NATO and EU membership. 'The one path we have is a wide Euro-Atlantic autobahn which takes us to membership in the EU and NATO', Poroshenko said on the 26<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ukrainian independence, adding that the Association Agreement is 'convincing evidence of our ultimate – *de facto* and *de jure* – break with the empire'.<sup>[5]</sup>

Nevertheless, both, organisations are only offering integration without membership; the EU has never offered a membership prospect to Ukraine while NATO cooled on this question from 2008. NATO remains cautious because of on-going territorial conflicts with Russia which if Ukraine was invited to join would become NATO's war. The West has additionally been routinely frustrated by Ukraine's inability to meet all of its commitments to reform, particularly in the areas of the rule of law and corruption.

How will these domestic politics influence international politics? Since the Cold War, much policy has been based on the presumed link between democracy and peace, much to the derision of realist scholars. Rather than rehearse that debate, we ask what the future might hold if Russia becomes more democratic; or if Ukraine does not.

Would a more democratic Russia be a more peaceful Russia? That has been the guiding assumption of Western

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policy not only since 1991, but throughout history. The assumption could never be put to the test until 1991, and the evidence since then is not conclusive. But the electoral success of Russian nationalist parties, and the need of Yeltsin to use his extensive powers to push back against revanchists in the 1990s, provides some evidence against the argument that a democratic Russia would be pro-Western. The majority of Russians, irrespective of their attitudes toward Putin, share a consensus that Russia has the right to control the Crimea and that Ukrainians are not a separate people.

Would a more autocratic Ukraine turn towards Russia? People in both Russia and the West have assumed this, but the evidence is mixed. Yanukovich was autocratic and sought Russian support for his autocracy, but he was not always a willing participant in Russia's efforts at integration. Kuchma, who moved Ukraine toward a competitive authoritarian regime[6] in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and paved the way for Yanukovich to try to steal the 2004 election, also drove a concerted effort to strengthen Ukraine's ties with NATO and to consolidate Ukraine's 'multi-vector'[7] foreign policy. The West supported Kuchma's heavy-handed methods of adopting a constitution with very strong presidential powers because it was seen as needed to overcome leftist conservatives in parliament.

In sum, the relationship between regime type and foreign policy is less clear than many appear to assume. That is a crucial point, because a major contributor to conflict has been the West's desire to spread democracy (assuming that in doing so they are also spreading peace) and Russia's desire to prevent it (assuming that in doing so it is preventing states from aligning against it). Both policies rely on the assumed links between regime type and foreign policy, and both therefore rely on flimsy foundations. Ironically, breaking the presumption of a link between regime type and foreign policy might help ratchet down tensions here and elsewhere.

## Notes

[1] Angela Stent, 'America and Russia: Same Old, Same Old', *The National Interest*, September-October 2017. <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/america-russia-same-old-same-old-21941>

[2] 'Whataboutism' is a term coined by western diplomats during the Cold War for the Soviet tactic of countering any discussion of Soviet wrongdoing by pointing to some unrelated flaw in the west. The Economist noted an upsurge in the tactic in 2008. See 'Whataboutism', *The Economist*, 31 January 2008. <http://www.economist.com/node/10598774>

[3] See, for example, Sergei Karaganov, 'The Victory of Russia and the New Concert of Nations', *Russia in Global Affairs*, March 2017. <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/pubcol/Russias-Victory-new-Concert-of-Nations-18641>

[4] <http://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2017/08/26/7153204/>

[5] <http://www.president.gov.ua/news/vistup-prezidenta-pid-chas-urochistogo-zahodu-parad-vijsk-z-42878>

[6] Poroshenko reiterated these views on Ukraine's divorce from Russia even more forcefully in his state of the nation speech to parliament on 7 September 2017. <http://www.president.gov.ua/news/poslannya-prezidenta-ukrayini-do-verhovnoyi-radi-ukrayini-pr-43086>. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, 'The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism', *Journal of Democracy*, vol.13, no.2 (April 2002), pp.51-65.

[7] T. Kuzio, 'Neither East nor West: Ukraine's Security Policy', *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol.52, no.5 (September/October 2005), pp.59-68.

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