

Is Ukraine an Autonomous Actor?

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In the torrent of commentaries generated by the dangerously evolving Ukraine story, three narratives compete, or complement each other, in denying agency to Ukraine. In the first, the escalating crisis in Ukraine is presented as the result of American and/or European intervention in Ukraine, to pursue their geopolitical and economic interests. In the second, the collapse of the Russia-friendly Yanukovich regime as a result of an insurrection is seen as provoking Russia to secure its historic interests. In the third, Ukraine is presented as a profoundly, if not fatally, divided society that does not have the social capital to challenge, or resist, Russia. In other words, Ukraine is a pawn of Great Powers politics, a geographic appendage of Russia and it is not a nation. What these narratives negate the possibility that the social forces that actually constitute Ukraine may be in a position to control their destiny, even in the face of unremitting pressure from a powerful neighbouring state.

The geopolitical argument is well known: NATO should never have been allowed to expand to the boundaries of Russia, which had the effect of fueling a sense of insecurity among Russian leaders, and offering NATO membership to Georgia and Ukraine in 2008 led to two military invasions — the second one (Crimea) with a six-year delay. EU eastward enlargement also had deleterious long-term consequences, in full view in the last three months (notwithstanding the fact that the EU tended to be presented as a benign actor during the initial NATO push in the late 1990s). EU enlargement has the effect of reorienting

emerging domestic markets at the periphery to serve the needs of dominant economies. The neoliberal variation of the argument is that Europe seeks to expand its supply of cheap labor. In a nutshell, US and European interests – military and economic – are projected eastward at the expense of Russia's.

The flaw in this macro-argument is that the means by which the US and Europe seek to influence actors on the ground is assumed, but never demonstrated. During the Orange Revolution in 2004, it became known that US NGOs had previously offered training in non-violent resistance and political activism, as if this could explain the sustained mobilization of hundreds of thousands of demonstrators – EU and NATO-inclined – over a period of nearly three weeks. Throughout Euromaidan, the claim of European and American “interference” was heard insistently, even if the support was intangibly political and unaccompanied with concrete economic assistance. Conspiracy theory aside, there was no training of Maidan activists, no overt or covert financial aid, and the personalized financial sanctions and direct European mediation came at the very end. The question, as a matter of fact, is why Yanukovich let European mediators negotiate himself into oblivion? The larger question for the geopolitical perspective is how to reconcile these hard interests of Great Powers with their apparent inability to actually influence events as they unfolded on the ground.

The second narrative pertains to Russia's historic interests in Ukraine. For some, it is straightforward story of Russian imperialism: Russia has been ruling over the heart of Ukraine since the 17th century and does not want to let go. For others, it is a story of Russian identity: Russians define themselves as originating from Kyivan Rus' and there are sites of memory (Crimea certainly, but also Kyiv) that deeply resonates in Russian culture. For yet another constituency, it is a story of both Russian and Ukrainian identity: Russian-speaking Eastern Ukrainians accept the notion that Russia and Ukraine should stay close, as they share common memory and interests, and this implies that Russia should keep a certain degree of influence over Ukrainian external orientation. These clashing or overlapping perspectives have been around a long time, as they cut to the core of the Ukrainian-Russian identity encounter, but they as such provide us with little explanation as to why Russia-Ukraine relations have escalated to such an extent that the Russian military occupies Crimea and

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that Russia, as President Putin stated last week, reserves for itself the right to intervene militarily in Eastern Ukraine.

The missing link is the current nature of the political regime in Russia. It had become clear for years that presidential power in Russia is no longer checked by parliament, the court or the media. The latest revelation, as reported in the Russian and American press, is that the Crimean invasion – and the threat to Eastern Ukraine – was decided by an extremely small group of advisers, all former KGB officials from the Leningrad days, bypassing the formal security institutions of the state – the Security Council, the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Defense. President Putin has concentrated powers to such an extent that he essentially makes decisions of paramount importance without internal accountability, without even an internal debate among elites in the closed Russian system. One could make the case that such seminal personalized power has not been seen in Russia since the days of high Stalinism.

The point is that the means to realize Russia's perceived historic interests are determined by a single man in the most extreme fashion of breaking international post-war rules of behavior. Thus, the problem is not the claim of Russian interests in Ukraine, but destabilizing policies originating from one man who appears to have insulated himself from internal pressure at home. It has been said that the Western concerted response regarding the inviolability of the principle of territorial integrity rings hollow, in light of repeated violations of the sovereignty of other states by the United States in Iraq or Pakistan (with the ongoing drone campaign). But this misses the extremely grave precedent that the annexation of Crimea is posing to the international order. The US overthrew a regime, an act almost unanimously condemned in Europe, but did not alter the boundaries of Iraq. The point is not about seeking to influence the domestic politics of a foreign state, which is standard fare in international politics in various degrees of intensity, but straight-out annexation of a territory belonging to another state, which has not been seen in Europe since World War II. For anyone with a modicum of understanding of mid-twentieth century European history, this precedent is highly unsettling and with consequences that no one, President Putin included, can anticipate. Equally unsettling are the delusional statements of the President, wholly disconnected from the empirical reality (such as: there are no Russian troops in Crimea, the Maidan front-line

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activists were trained in Poland and Lithuania, the Ukrainian government is run by fascists), and unchallenged by a domestic public or elite opinion kept in check. When foreign policy objectives are sought in imaginary grievances, we have left the realm of valid and long-standing regional interests to enter that of a regionally threatening autocracy.

The third narrative is about the alleged incomplete nature of the nation-building process in Ukraine. From the inside, this is actually the standard narrative of Ukrainian nationalism: the highest degree of national consciousness is to be found in Western Ukraine, to a lesser extent at the center, while Eastern Ukraine, as a result of decades, if not centuries, of “Russification” lacks behind and the “Little Russian” mentality, having internalized the Russian perspective on Ukraine, remains prevalent. From the outside, a similar view remains popular: Ukraine is an artificial construction, its regions having lived under different empires, and Ukraine is not a nation, or not yet a nation, because of greatly pronounced regional differences between East and West. Because of its deep ambivalence, torn between Russia and Europe, between Russian and Ukrainian culture, Ukraine lacks the social capital, the united sense of national solidarity, to withstand the tremendous pressure now applied by a resurgent Russia (a Russia, we should add, that brooks no political opposition to its expansionist project). For having studied and reflected upon Ukraine’s ethnic, linguistic, and regional makeup since my graduate student days, let me offer the following caveats to what I consider to be a misleading view of Ukraine as a weak nation.

First, the argument that Ukraine is in a state of incomplete nation-building assumes a finality that just does not reflect how nations come about and transform themselves. True, Eastern Ukrainians are ambivalent towards Russia while Western Ukrainians are not. No one knows what the threat of military intervention on Eastern Ukraine could lead to, not even Eastern Ukrainians themselves. What we know from comparative history is that military pressure on a state, to the point of occupation, very often divides populations, opening up deep social wounds that may take generations to heal. We also know from the contemporary —pluralist— experience of Western nations that ambivalence accompanies the expression of nationalist sentiment. The Québécois francophones have been ambivalent for forty years in their relationship with

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English Canada, the Scots remain ambivalent towards the British, the same applies with Catalans or Basques regarding the Spanish (or Castilian) identity.

True, Eastern and Western Ukrainians are divided, emotionally divided, over the meaning of the OUN-UPA insurrection and of the Red Army march to Berlin, but, to give two prominent examples, the Spaniards are equally emotionally divided over the meaning of the 1930s Civil War and the regional polarization in American politics, more pronounced than ever, has roots in the US Civil War. In comparative perspective, the regional and memorial divides in Ukraine are not particularly unique. What matters now is not the divisions per se, but how a state, any state, can withstand the threat of military intervention. An external intervention can create divisions, or divisions can come to the fore in ways that would never have been possible in peaceful times, but divisions themselves do not cause intervention.

The second aspect of the weak nation narrative is the ethnic angle. Invoking a claim that had not been heard in Europe since 1930s – a most worrisome claim due its horrific consequences back then – Russia has invaded Crimea ostensibly to protect ethnic Russians from imminent danger. A companion claim has been made regarding the so-called “compatriots”, or “Russian-speakers” in Eastern Ukraine, often understood in Western media reporting as a claim targeting ethnic Russian minorities – sometimes presented as majorities – in the East. The Russian stance is the Ukrainian government has been illegitimately captured by Ukrainian extreme nationalists (“fascists”), endangering the Russian “compatriots” in Eastern Ukraine. In fact, ethnic Russians, as a socially or politically organized group, do not exist in Eastern Ukraine (with apparently some minor exceptions in Odessa). The socially relevant group is that of Russian-speakers, individuals preferring to use Russian in public, comprised of both Ukrainians and Russians, or literally of individuals that are both Ukrainian and Russian by lineage – a phenomenon that is not recorded on the census — and whose attachment to Ukraine as a united territory is currently under stress.

The unknown about Eastern Ukrainians is less their sense of national identity, which is ambivalent, but their potential for civic engagement. Eastern Ukraine has traditionally been a passive society and, with the exception of a miners’

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strike at the height of perestroika, the first popular demonstrations, on either side of the political confrontation, in Eastern Ukraine have precisely occurred during or since Maidan. Eastern Ukraine is not the site of an incomplete ethnonation, but more a site of an incomplete civic nation in the throes of overcoming its tradition of social obedience, first as a response to the Maidan insurrection and its powerful appeal to social justice (against corruption and police brutality), and now as a response to a looming military threat at the border. The disquieting effect of a society just opening up to public contestations is that the social vacuum tends to be filled by radical groups with little roots in society at large, and yet with the potential to perpetrate acts of long-lasting consequences. This is what we may be observing in places like Donetsk, Luhansk and Kharkiv, in an extremely fluid situation. On the one hand, aggressive pro-Russian demonstrations, seeking to imitate the seizure of government buildings done earlier by radical nationalists in Western Ukraine, and framed by the Ukrainian media as bused in from Russia, although this remains to be verified. On the other, peaceful pro-Maidan demonstrations, but also the presence of radical nationalists, of the Pravyi sector type, acting as vigilantes. Intensifying pressure from Russia could provoke local violence in Eastern Ukraine. The developments remain uncertain not because Ukraine is not a nation, but because politics as a process of open contestation may be gaining Eastern Ukraine. <