

Ukraine at the Crossroads of Survival as a Political Community

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DEFINING UKRAINE: DOMESTIC POLITICS IN THE SHADOW OF A CATASTROPHE

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For more than twenty years scholars, perhaps lacking imagination, have been talking about a Ukraine at the crossroads, symbolizing a country torn between an Eastern and a Western orientation, and being politically incapable of choosing any. No one in their right mind could have anticipated that Ukraine, in spring 2014, would stand at the precipice of an actual split, along an East-West axis. The masks have fallen this morning. President Putin brazenly told the world that he does not recognize the legitimacy of the incorporation of all Eastern and Southern provinces into Soviet Ukraine in the early 1920s. The plan is now clear: Russia seeks to annex half of Ukraine by force, through the instigation of “popular” rebellions of the kind that we are witnessing in Donetsk. The different scenarios that can unfold from this effective declaration of war are all gloomy, and cannot be predicted, but let me attempt to tackle their ethnic and civic dimensions.

First, the ethnic angle. The dominant Western scholarly narrative in the 1990s was that Russians had an amorphous imperial identity. Parties promoting the interests of Russians in the “near abroad”, such as the Congress of Russian Communities, were laughed at in elections. As Kim Martens put it, analyzing

Putin's Crimean Victory speech last month, Russia has now an ethnic nationalist in power, and one that exercises near absolute power over all institutions of the state. As a true ethnic nationalist, he denies to others the right to use the principle that he uses himself. After all, the reason Donbas and "Novorossia" were included in the Soviet Ukrainian Republic was because of the ethnographic principle, the key principle of border delimitation in the 1920s. That is to say, when given a choice, a solid if not overwhelming majority of residents of these provinces, the former Little Russians, declared themselves Ukrainians. The fundamental point is that the Bolsheviks recognized Ukrainians as a nationality and this is what President Putin is now overturning, at least for half of the country, since he makes no distinction between Russians and Russian-speakers (2/3 of Eastern Ukrainians call themselves Ukrainians, 3/4 prefer speaking Russian).

That these Ukrainians prefer to speak Russian is surely explained, in this view, by the fact that their language is a low culture rural vernacular that is shed for a language of civilization (Russian) once they migrate to the city. Ukrainian thus is not a language — notwithstanding what the Soviet state ruled at the outset — but a dialect. If Ukrainian is not a language, then Ukrainians are not a nation, and if they are not a nation, then they can't possibly have a state. None of this, of course, is new to anyone familiar with the Russian-Ukrainian identity clash, and the same arguments were heard in the 1920s, but they now motivate the actions of an unchecked revisionist authoritarian leader. The reflex is to view President Putin as an opportunist who plays up the ethnic card to advance state interests. Far more disturbing is to accept that he means what he says — and is willing to go all the way. He means what he says because domesticating Ukraine is the cornerstone of his project to restore Russia's grandeur.

The Ukrainians, in President Putin's political imagination, are the Galicians, but this does not make them worthier of recognition, due to their inherent "fascist" complexion. The depth of the official Russian narrative's revulsion towards Galician-based nationalists is astounding. "Fascist" can be decoded as the affront to forcefully oppose Soviet/Russian power. The Western Ukrainian insurrection in World War II, led by the OUN-UPA, dared inflict huge losses on Soviet forces. Flash forward to Maidan and the radical front-line activists, using the symbolism of the OUN-UPA, dared offering a resistance to such

an extent that it brought down the corrupt Russia-propped Yanukovich regime. It is not the dark side of these insurgencies that rankles Russia — their implication then in the massacre of civilians (since Russia is whitewashing Stalinist mass violence), their far right profile now (since Russia is partnering with the far right everywhere in Europe) — but the Ukrainian determination to resist aggression (the annexation of Western Ukraine in 1939 was an act of aggression, Crimea and Donetsk are current acts of aggression). This is a negation of the right of self-determination in the existential sense of the word.

The civic angle, however, is something that Ukrainians need to settle among themselves. This is the moment of truth between Eastern and Western Ukrainians. Thus far, there is a crucial difference between the Crimea and Donetsk cases, in that the local and regional political elite in Donetsk does not support calls for annexation to Russia. Speculation abound in the pro-Maidan social media that this elite plays a double game, if not financing outright the pro-Russia insurgents. Yet it is significant to note that the Party of Regions began its extraordinary session yesterday in Donetsk by raising the Ukrainian flag and singing the Ukrainian national anthem, eschewing the St. George and Donetsk National Republic symbols seen in demonstrations. The real question now is less the political manipulation of former lower-ranking Yanukovich cronies, but the apparent breakdown of political authority in Donetsk. The masked insurgents are contemptuous of the Party of Regions.

Soberingly enough, from a Maidan perspective, the Party of Regions in Donetsk may be the only force able to quash President Putin's plan to fracture Ukraine. The hard fact is that Eastern Ukraine, certainly Donbas, has been run like a one-party state and that there are no opposition forces that Kyiv can talk to — the armed men, when they are not from Russia itself are from fringe groups with no political experience. It has become fairly clear that these insurgents, whoever they are, have popular support — the degree of which is impossible to ascertain, but sufficient to demoralize soldiers who seem psychologically incapable of distancing themselves from the simple folks confronting them. The popular support spring from a general malaise towards Maidan, which most Eastern Ukrainians do not understand, exception for their rejection of police violence, from a deep anxiety over becoming the prime victims of a collapse of economic trade with Russia, and from a similarly deep anxiety over

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their long-term ability to use Russian and to have control over what is decided in Kyiv.

Call that the fear of exclusion. The Party of Regions, of what is left of it, remains the only force, in Donetsk at least, that can channel this malaise into a political process that would preserve a Ukrainian political community — as opposed to the paralysis of violent takeovers. This is an exceedingly hard pill to swallow for the pro-Maidan constituency since the Party of Regions represented everything against which Maidan stood for (contempt towards the individual, grand theft of state resources), but the survival of the state is at stake and Maidan will have little meaning in a truncated state. If Pravyi Sector, not otherwise known for its philosemitism, is willing to protect synagogues from the provocation of pro-Russian forces, couldn't it shake hands with politicians of any stripes who declare themselves for the preservation of a Ukrainian state?

The demands formulated by the Donetsk Party of Regions can certainly form the basis of serious negotiations: election of regional governors and local leaders, greater economic autonomy and a status for the Russian language. This is not the Bosnian model that Russian is forcibly pushing forward, namely, regional control over security forces and a veto over foreign policy orientation (meaning no EU), which would de facto truncate Ukraine. A tough nut to crack will be language. Since independence, Eastern Ukrainians have feared that they might lose their jobs due to a looming Ukrainianization (making Ukrainian mandatory at work). Even if Kyiv wanted to, this couldn't possibly happen, as there wouldn't be enough civil servants willing to enforce it. The change in language practices hinges on making Eastern Ukrainians accept that they would have to use Ukrainian in certain situations, to accommodate the rights of Ukrainian-speakers to be addressed in their language of preference. Ukrainian-language activists have been highly reluctant to concede any kind of status to Russian, on the grounds that it would remove incentives to use Ukrainian at all. This is the ultimate test to find the *modus vivendi* that have eluded Ukrainians of both language predispositions in the past twenty years. This is the test of citizenship, of whether Ukrainians can overcome their differences over language, historical memory and economic conditions. The extreme pressure by Russia could bring them closer in forging a common destiny. Or tear them apart.

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