



## Reflections on the Ukraine Crisis

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### Summary

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The crisis surrounding the independence of the Ukraine has struck most observers completely unexpected. It has unveiled a Black Swan that nobody has noticed before – the possible return of a Cold War type rivalry between East and West. Obviously, in the Ukraine the existing government model has failed. With its independence in 1991, the Ukraine inherited – with regions that have completely different histories, with a plethora of unresolved ethnic, religious, social and economic conflicts – a difficult legacy.

The challenge is twofold:

- Save the Ukraine from the danger of a possible civil war.
- Save the Ukraine from the real threat of a humanitarian disaster.

From Russian perception with the Ukraine crisis strategic threat from the West has become possible again. The Putin speech in the Kremlin on 18 March 2014 has highlighted that Russia does no longer recognize the West as a credible Partner as the West pursues a Cold War-like containment policy against Russia. Putin is convinced that international law has lost its character as a system of rules setting reference points, but has rather been reduced to a menu of options from which powerful nations choose options that suit their interests.

The key motivation of German politics has become de-escalation. In solving the Ukrainian crisis, the EU and Russia should act as natural geopolitical partners. Only together they have the capacity to stabilize the situation in the Ukraine. Rebuilding trust is at the core of future developments. To this end it is of high importance to keep all available communication channels open. A process of reconciliation needs to get started. Consensus, cooperation and participation need to be organized in the Ukraine. The OSCE could have a key role.

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## ANALYSIS

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### Black Swan unveiled

The crisis surrounding the independence of the Ukraine has struck most observers completely unexpected. It has unveiled a Black Swan that nobody has noticed before – the possible return of a Cold War type rivalry between East and West. As the German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier stated in a recent Spiegel-interview: *„...the events of the last few months could lead to a break, to a crossroad for Europe. The events in the Ukraine have led to the worst crisis since the end of the Cold War. The gains Europe has achieved since the fall of the Berlin Wall in terms of peace, freedom and prosperity are now at risk. If the wrong decisions are made now, they could nullify decades of work furthering the freedom and security of Europe.“*<sup>1</sup>

Anti-government protests in the Ukraine have been followed by political upheaval and international crisis. When President Viktor Yanukovich fled in a panic from Kiev on 21 February 2014, this set off a dynamic whose consequences not only the Ukraine, but rather the world must now deal with. The Ukraine has called for fresh presidential elections on May 25. The move was countered by the Crimea administration that voted overwhelmingly to join Russia in a referendum.

With regard to the Ukraine the challenge is twofold:

- Save the Ukraine from the danger of a possible civil war.
- Save the Ukraine from the real threat of a humanitarian disaster.

Both threats would affect prosperity and security of Russia and the European Union as well.

Beyond the Ukraine the crisis is likely to have global ramifications. For a long time it appeared to political leaders throughout the world that the „rule of law“ had succeeded over the „rule of power“ particularly in the highly integrated European Union environment and its neighbourhood. Now, the increasingly violent developments in the Ukraine – including the “annexation” of the Crimea and Sevastopol – point in the opposite direction. Language, pictures and performance of involved actors that reflect on a possible 3<sup>rd</sup> World War, ask for tough sanctions and military moves or do not keep promises rather contribute to escalating the developing crisis. Vladimir Putin recently observed in his speech of 18 March 2014 to the deputies of the State Duma the “rule of power” as a key element of the emerging New World Order.

### Developments in the Ukraine

Obviously, in the Ukraine the existing government model has failed. With its independence in 1991, the Ukraine inherited – with regions that have completely different histories, with a plethora of unresolved ethnic, religious, social and economic conflicts – a difficult legacy. Unfortunately the past decades have been a complete loss for the Ukraine. Half-hearted reforms, and a cooperative government structure that integrated private structures into justice, police, armed forces etc. also fed by corruption, crime etc. have led to a dysfunc-

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<sup>1</sup> Steinmeier, Frank-Walter, Interview, 'Russia is Playing a Dangerous Game' in: SPIEGEL Online, 28 April 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/frank-walter-steinmeier-talks-about-the-ukraine-crisis-and-russia-a-966493.html> (access 5 May 2014)



tional system. The Ukraine is the only post-Soviet nation that has not achieved the living standard of the Soviet period. It has turned into one of the poorest European countries.

Each change of the regime was accompanied by major purges that reached down to the level of hospitals and middle schools. In one case it led to the point that a complete village rose up against its corrupt police that also had been violating human rights on a permanent scale. The Ukraine governments – to include the present – have been abusing their power position to draw money out of the country for personal advantage. The legitimacy of the present government is additionally challenged as it represents only 4 out of 25 regions of the Ukraine and monopolises decision-making. This puts a premium on early elections. But, what credibility are elections on 25 May likely to have?

20 years of transformation in the Ukraine have led to a polarization of respective positions instead of achieving compromises and comprehensive approaches. Several social-cultural divides have developed

- Russian-Ukraine
- industrial-economical
- centre versus periphery
- young people versus older population

These different groups obviously have different interpretations of the terminus “freedom”.

Until February 2014 these developments were citizen driven. Afterwards particularly militant forces took charge. This eased involvement from outside, i.e. Russia, USA and the EU. Eastern Ukrainian separatism has no mass character. Small armed entities shape developments there. The Ukraine is likely to collapse politically, economically and socially unless there isn't a rapid turn around. If the elections fail, we may see a civil war soon!

To this end the Ukraine needs to form rapidly a round table that includes all relevant stakeholders in the Ukraine and to create a standing national assembly of all stakeholders to identify what action and improvements need to be taken and to provide the nation with a new constitution as result of a consensus. At the beginning of this process important questions need to be resolved that stand in the way of any reasonable compromise

- Who has been shooting at the Maidan?
- Where do the weapons come from?
- Has Yanukovich been arrested?

### Russian perceptions

For the past two decades Russia has seen strategic risks coming predominantly from the South and not from the West. The Ukrainian crisis has altered this perception. Strategic threat from the West has become possible again. Russia considers the Crimea crucial to its national security. In Putin's perception the Ukraine crisis represents a showdown that he could win. Putin has been using the upheaval in Ukraine to pay back the West for what he sees as a quarter century of disrespect, humiliation and diplomatic bullying.



Obviously, the Russian perspectives of the emergence of the Ukrainian crisis as well as possible solutions have been shaped by three decisive experiences in the recent past

- NATO membership of East European countries
- Developments in the Greater Middle East – the engagement of the West ended repeatedly in bloody civil wars
- Decision to deploy Ballistic Missile Defence in Eastern Europe

Now – from a Russian perspective – the regime change in the Ukraine has been massively supported by the West and has destroyed a fragile balance within the state with massive negative consequences.

The Putin speech in the Kremlin on 18 March 2014 is a viable source to analyse Russian behaviour in the Ukraine as he outlined his principle approach to security<sup>2</sup>:

- Russia does no longer recognize the West as a credible Partner as the West pursues a Cold War-like containment policy against Russia.
- Russia no longer considers itself as part of European civilization. Russia is a democracy but of particular shape.
- As international law has been reduced to a menu of options from which powerful nations choose options that suit their interests international law has lost its character as a system of rules setting reference points.
- The Westphalian principle upholding state sovereignty and territorial integrity has lost its validity for weaker states. It's not the rule of law, but rather the rule of the stronger (Plato) that determines processes in the developing new world order. Security becomes a playing field for stronger states that have the capability to protect their borders with their own armed forces to include the military support of partner nations.
- The role of international organizations such as the United Nations, the OSCE and the Council of Europe has diminished. Their rules and frameworks have been ignored, if they negatively affect the national interests of powerful nations. This has become apparent with view to several military operations in the past two decades.

Putin relies his vision to the entire territory of the former Soviet Union reflecting on "Russia's historical heritage". Obviously Russia will take action, if any of the former Soviet republics will attempt to join NATO or the European Union. As Putin sees the world becoming much more volatile place with increasing risks of more military conflicts, he has been focusing on the development of a fundamentally new balance of power in the world that sees the declining Western economical and military power in the world, while Asia, South America and Africa are gaining influence. He feels supported by the major non-Western Members of the BRICs and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

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<sup>2</sup> Ryzhkov, Vladimir, „The new Putin Doctrine“, The Moscow Times, 3 April 2014



Aleksandr Dynkin, Director of the Moscow based Institute of World Economy and International Relations observed recently that the decade from 1989 until 1999 has been a “golden period” that ended with the bombardment of the Kosovo, where the Russian government experienced a situation of complete helplessness when it simply had to accept international behaviour without being able to bring own considerations to bear. The subsequent years have been a period of a correct relationship. Now he considers Russia and the West at the edge of a new Cold War.

Core of the problem is in his view the Russian perception that it has no adequate place in the new emerging global order particularly not in Europe. The West has been obsessed with the idea that a new empire is growing and attempted to disconnect the Russian Commonwealth states from Russia. But a security order without Russia means always a security against Russia. Consequently after the Cold War the attempts to build a new world order have failed. But, while in the first Cold War everybody understood that the prize of failure is too high today we have lost this sensitivity. It needs to be regained.

### German approaches to crisis management

In looking back on the recent developments in the Ukraine, on the German side there is a remarkable degree of self-criticism. It has become apparent what difficult partners Germany has chosen on the Ukrainian side. It has also become apparent that there is more effort needed to better understand all stakeholders concerned to include Russia.

Germany's position can be described by

- Preference for cooperative peace solutions
- Stick to the rule of law
- Strive to avoid conflict in the Ukraine particular through close involvement of the OSCE and the United Nations
- Involve and organize participation of smaller powers
- Restrain the German power position as a political lesson learned by German politics
- Cultivate power via integration

The key motivation of German politics has become de-escalation even though the prospects of successful de-escalation have been diminishing in the past weeks. To this end it is of high importance to keep all available communication channels open. A process of reconciliation needs to get started. Consensus, cooperation and participation needs to be organized in the Ukraine. The OSCE could have a key role in crisis management.

To this end, Matthias Platzeck, former Prime Minister Brandenburg and President German-Russian Forum has come up with a couple of recommendations:

1. Round table in the Ukraine to include all relevant parties
2. Decentralisation of governance
3. Disarmament of groups



4. Analysis of the Maidan-shootings and what really happened in February in Kiev
5. Stabilization of economy

The German public has been supporting this approach. It understands the German interest in partnership and the political, economic, and cultural exchanges in European-Russian relations. Building on dialogue in the European neighbourhood appears to them as the only valid way. Yet, as pro-Russia militants seize more public buildings in Ukraine's turbulent east and violence escalates, President Barack Obama and Germany's Angela Merkel agreed in Washington that further sanctions need to be taken if Russia continued to destabilize its neighbour ahead of elections on May 25.

### **Rebuilding trust and adjusting capabilities**

In solving the Ukrainian crisis, the EU and Russia are natural geopolitical partners. Only together they have the capacity to stabilize the situation in the Ukraine. Unfortunately, the loss of trust between the stakeholders is a key problem of the present situation. Trust is foundation of cooperation. This very foundation has been damaged. Rebuilding trust is at the core of future developments. Russia's attempts to develop a solution commonly with EU and USA in order to force the solution upon the Ukraine is met sceptically, particularly as Russia is seen as an involved party.

A further complicating factor is the new Putin doctrine that is highlighting the "rule of power" as a key element of the emerging New World Order. It may well inspire EU and NATO to adjust European and transatlantic foreign, defence, trade and economic policies and capabilities. The Ukrainian crisis shows that forcibly discharged military conflicts in the neighbourhood of NATO and the EU have become possible again. This insight stands in stark contrast to the assumptions of the security and defence policy of the basic documents of most member states of both organizations, which have been focusing on asymmetric crisis scenarios far away in Europe. As particularly NATO has begun seeking to maintain its relevance in the post Afghanistan era, the Ukraine crisis may be directing NATO's and the EU's political military narrative from "deployed" to "prepared".

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### **Remarks:**

Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



#### About the Author of this Issue

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Ralph D. Thiele is Chairman of the Political-Military Society (pmg), Berlin, Germany and CEO at StatByrd Consulting. In 40 years of politico-military service, Colonel (ret.) Thiele has gained broad political, technological, academic and military expertise. He has been directly involved in numerous national and NATO strategic issues while serving as executive officer to the Bundeswehr Vice Chief of Defence Staff, Military Assistant to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, in the Planning and Policy Staff of the German Minister of Defence, as Chief of Staff of the NATO Defense College, as Commander of the Bundeswehr Transformation Centre and as Director of Faculty at the German General Staff and Command College in Hamburg.

He has published numerous books and articles and is lecturing widely in Europe, Asia (Beijing, Seoul, Tokyo, and Ulaanbaatar) in the U.S. and Brazil on current comprehensive security affairs, cyber security, border security, maritime domain security, protection of critical infrastructure and defence and also historical issues.

Ralph D. Thiele is a member of the German Atlantic Association and member of the Defence Science Board to the Austrian Minister of Defence.



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