

## To Know or Not to Know: Ukraine, Russia & the West

By John Bruni

Reflecting on a recent talk on current events in the Ukraine at the Royal United Services Institute of South Australia (RUSI of SA), the following points struck a chord.



Firstly, that we in the West are not necessarily receiving an objective view of the current conflict, which says a great deal about the Western reportage, that is, that collectively, the media tow their government line and see it as 'patriotic duty'. This leads to another issue. At what point do newspaper editors consciously or otherwise act as a propaganda vehicle for their government? Is there an unspoken 'grand bargain' where some issues of controversy, especially on the subject of war and peace, create a bandwagon effect on which people are led down a pre-determined avenue of subjective bias? Bias against anything Arabic or Muslim, as for example the ongoing war against Muslim extremism; or a re-warming of old, Cold War style, anti-Russian bias as seen in the current pro-Russian uprising in eastern Ukraine against the authorities in Kiev.

The supposition presented was controversial to say the least. It indicated that:

- Russia is not as weak and out of options as the West, through its media outlets, claim.
- Russia has retaliatory options against the West (short of war) for its active support of the Ukrainian government.
- NATO, especially Eastern European members Poland, Hungary and Romania are actively supporting the government in Kiev in its fight against the self-declared pro-Russian republics of Lugansk and Donetsk.
- If point 'c' is true, then the conflict in Kiev is no longer a civil war in which only the east Ukrainian separatists receive 'foreign' (i.e. Russian) support, but where Kiev is being armed, trained, enabled and directly supported in its combat operations by 'foreign' (i.e. NATO) interests.
- This makes the current conflict a proxy war, essentially waged at the strategic level by Washington and Moscow.

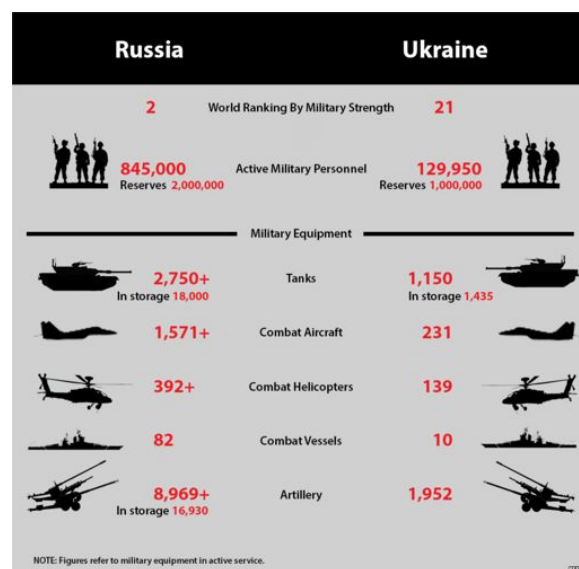
These are powerful and compelling points.



Russia as an integrated member of the global economy, has the ability to close the door to

Western trade, as it has done through its own sanctions regime against Western Europe. This has hurt Germany, the heart of the EU economy, with the consequence of direct knock on effects on France and elsewhere. Should the interdependencies between Russia and Western Europe be severed, even just temporarily, the pain will go both ways. We are already seeing this in the German and French economic downturns. As the northern winter approaches, more Russian pressure may be put on prices for its critical gas and oil resources, particularly in Kiev, and quite possibly on the rest of Western Europe. The danger of course is that the EU economies may plunge back into recession. That Russia, should it stay its current course and continue its support of the Lugansk and Donetsk uprisings against Kiev, will be economically punished by the EU and US, goes without saying. It then becomes a case of how much pain will the West endure for a united Ukraine? What will Kiev gain, should it prevail in its struggle against Moscow? A seat at the EU table perhaps? How would the EU integrate a country the size of Ukraine? How many jobs would be lost in struggling agricultural producers Spain, Italy, France and Greece should Ukraine with its abundant, cheap agricultural labour and products be unleashed? Or would a reunited, Western armed and supported Ukraine, be a dagger forever pointed at the heart of Russia as a permanent reminder to Moscow of its folly to contemplate a sovereign sphere of influence? This latter scenario presents Ukraine with no pleasant option because it will essentially become an armed camp. Russian memories are long, so the idea of any form of peaceful co-existence between Moscow and Kiev under these circumstances is fanciful. Too many lives have already been lost, too much property destroyed or confiscated, too many people among the Russian-speaking minority forced to flee Ukraine for the safety of Russia. President

Putin may not have a pro-Russian buffer zone between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, but what may in fact be left in the wake of this phase of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict will be a scarred, warring land. A land where some of the remaining (vengeful) Russian speakers may seek to carry out a campaign of retribution along the line of assassinations of national politicians in Kiev, and/or local politicians installed to impose law and order in the shattered remains of Lugansk and Donetsk. Then there will be the targeting of families whose members supported Kiev during the war. Instability will be the rule and continuing tragedy the outcome.



Secondly, we need to remind ourselves that Russia is also a strategic partner to many Western diplomatic initiatives around the world. For example, the international efforts at rapprochement with Iran, disarming Syria's WMD stockpile, and strategically containing North Korea. A Russian international breakout – for instance, bringing the regime of Kim Jong-un in from the cold and making it a Russian proxy – would have highly undesirable and unpredictable effects. Selling Bashar al-Assad of Syria large quantities of quality Russian high-

tech weaponry may not just tilt the balance against ISIS/ISIL, but allow the Syrian leader to crush all anti-Assad resistance, even those more Western leaning. Pulling out of the P5+1 talks with Iran may not only destabilise international efforts in that country, but may show Iranian hard liners that there is an alternative to the West.

While the events of 9/11 have often been defined as the signal of major change in the international community, a time when non-state actors come of age and threaten the primacy and security of the established state order, events in Ukraine are reshaping the perception of the international community to something more familiar – clear enemies, clear demarcation of territories, clear national interests and purpose. Still, people in the West will see the anti-Russian bias in the newspapers and respond accordingly; they will be shepherded to see things, as governments want them to be seen.

*– Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International –*

Images Accessed: 26/08/2014

#### **Ukraine linguistics map**

<http://www.marketoracle.co.uk/images/2014/Mar/Ukraine-Language.jpg>

#### **Pro-Russian forces rally**

<http://s1.reutersmedia.net/resources/r/?m=02&d=20140313&t=2&i=861436835&w=&fh=&fw=&ll=700&pl=378&r=CBREA2C16ES00>

#### **Russia v. Ukraine military balance**

[http://gdb.rferl.org/9DAA492C-3742-4AF0-9C74-EA6BD7056F5F\\_mw1024\\_s\\_n.png](http://gdb.rferl.org/9DAA492C-3742-4AF0-9C74-EA6BD7056F5F_mw1024_s_n.png)