



## RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY AND THE UKRAINE CRISIS

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## The Sources of Russia's Ukraine Policy

Andrei Tsygankov, San Francisco

### Abstract

Since the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, Russia's policy toward its western neighbor has evolved from unhappy relations with Victor Yushchenko to rapprochement with Victor Yanukovich and then confrontation over the revolutionary power change in Kiev in February 2014. In order to explain Russia's changing policy, one has to consider both values and interests that guide the Kremlin's actions toward Ukraine.

### Values and Interests in Russia's Foreign Policy

International relations theory offers us several ways of thinking about values and interests in foreign policy. Realism understands values in terms of power, status, and prestige—either as a resource of national consolidation and support of state policy abroad or a pretext for asserting state interests. However, the formation of values should not be reduced to considerations of state interests and power. Values are developed historically and establish cultural lenses through which nations form their international perceptions and assess their interests. When pressured from outside, nations tend to react defensively by embracing ethnic prejudices, empowering nationalist voices, and engaging in exclusionary practices at home and abroad.

This dynamics is common for Russia's relations with the EU and the United States. On the one hand, Russia has developed historically strong ties with Western nations and aspires to their recognition of its values and interests. On the other hand, The Russian system of values has been established as a culturally distinct. Russian values include an authentic concept of spiritual freedom inspired by Eastern Christianity and the idea of a strong, socially protective state capable of defending its own subjects from abuses at home and threats from abroad. Russia cooperates with the Western nations when its fundamental values and interests are not challenged. When they are challenged, Russia tends to turn to nationalist and assertive foreign policy, especially if it possesses sufficient power capabilities.

With respect to Ukraine, the dominant Russian perception stresses strong cultural and historical ties between the two peoples. Predominantly Slavic and Eastern Christian, they fought against common enemies at least since the 17<sup>th</sup> century and were members of the same imperial state. Russians consider Ukrainian people to be "brotherly" and are resentful of what they view as the Western nations' attempts to challenge the established cultural bond or try to convert Ukraine into their own system of values. This view is only partly shared by Ukrainians and not at all shared by the EU and the United States. Polls register that before 2014

Ukrainians were deeply divided in their views of Russia and the West. In the context of international competition for power, these diverging perceptions have the potential to be polarized further by leading the sides toward a conflict.

In addition to values, Moscow considers Ukraine to be vitally important for protecting Russia's geopolitical interests. A large borderland territory, Ukraine serves to protect Russia from potential military intervention by Western powers. Ukraine also connects Russia to Europe economically, as most of Russian energy pipelines run through Ukrainian territory by supplying the EU customers. Many in the Kremlin view the connection as the last pillar of Russia's stability and power that must not be undermined if Russia were to survive and preserve its sovereignty, independence, and authentic political culture.

### The Three Stages in Russia–Ukraine Relations

In November 2004, Ukraine went through a revolutionary transfer of power following the fraudulent parliamentary election. The new president Victor Yushchenko soon proclaimed his commitment to gaining membership in NATO, as the United States indicated its support for the new Ukrainian leadership. In response, Russia indicated that it saw these developments as threatening its national security and began to apply pressures to those in the former Soviet region, who wanted to gain membership in the Western military alliance. The Kremlin was determined to stop the alliance's expansion, and at the summit in Bucharest in April 2008, Russia managed to block issuing Georgia and Ukraine Membership Action Plans (MAPs). Russia's frozen relations with Ukraine's president culminated in President Dmitri A. Medvedev decision to delay sending a new Russia's ambassador to Kiev in August 2009. Medvedev denounced Yushchenko for conducting "anti-Russian policies" by citing interferences with Russia's Black Sea fleet in Sevastopol, support for Georgia during Russia's military conflict with it in August 2008, bid for NATO membership, and disruption of Russia's gas deliveries to Europe, mistreating Russian investors, and glorifying Nazi collaborators.

Another area of growing tensions with Ukraine concerned energy trade. In December 2005, Russia–Ukraine energy dispute culminated in the Kremlin-controlled Gazprom’s decision to terminate gas deliveries for the neighbor. The two sides then negotiated a contract for one year according to which Ukraine would receive gas at a subsidized price in exchange for a low pipeline transit fee. In December 2008, another crisis culminated in termination of energy deliveries for Ukraine. This time Moscow was able to negotiate a beneficial agreement by exploiting domestic political divisions. Putin in his capacity of Prime Minister brokered a ten-year contract with Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko who was planning to run for presidency and was eager to demonstrate her ability to work with Russia.

In February 2010 Victor Yanukovich was elected the new president. As the result, Russian–Ukrainian improved considerably. Following a change in government, Russia negotiated new terms for its political influence. In April 2010, the two sides agreed to extend the lease on Russia’s Black Sea Fleet for 25 more years in exchange for the reduction of gas prices by 30 percent. In October 2011, following the idea of strengthening Russia’s ties with its neighbors, Putin proposed to build a new Eurasian Union among the CIS states. With Ukraine in mind, he emphasized an open nature of the proposed union and laid out economic incentives from joining it, including increase in trade, common modernization projects, and improved standards of living. In 2011, Russia formally invited Ukraine to join a Customs Union, promising another major discount for gas prices. The Customs Union was created in 2010 and includes Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan—it became operative in January 2012.

Despite the improvement of relations under Yanukovich, the Russia–Ukraine partnership remained limited. Ukrainian leadership reversed the NATO membership course and indicated willingness to accommodate Russia in strengthening its presence in the Ukrainian economy. However, Yanukovich did not sell controlling shares of Naftogas and declined the Customs Union offer. Rather than following the example of Belarus and Kazakhstan, Ukraine wanted to establish a special, 3+1 format of relationships with the organization that would allow it to continue its integration with the European Union. In October 2013, in a hope to make Yanukovich change his mind, Putin went as far as giving Ukraine another major discount in energy prices and pledged \$15 billion in aid. In response, in November 2013, at the EU summit in Vilnius Ukrainian president announced his decision to postpone an Association Agreement with the EU.

That decision proved to be fatal for Yanukovich. In response to what was perceived as the leadership’s rever-

sal of the drive to join the EU, mass demonstrations took place in Kiev protesting Yanukovich’s decision and lack of internal progress in the country. Led by opposition and supported by Western nations, the Ukrainian protest reached an unprecedented proportion. On February 21, 2014 the EU-brokered compromise between Yanukovich and opposition collapsed. For unknown reasons, Yanukovich left the office and moved to Russia.

The Kremlin blamed the Western governments for collapse of the compromise agreement and refused to recognize the new government in Kiev. Russia then seized control over Crimea and, following a referendum on its status, incorporated it within its own territory. The Kremlin demanded that Kiev initiate new constitutional changes, guarantee protection of Russian speakers, and conduct a decentralization reform in the country. The Russian government also retracted its energy discount and financial aid for Kiev. Finally, Russia further amassed thousands of its troops on Ukraine’s border and provided various forms of assistance for protesters in the eastern Ukraine who refused to recognize the authority of Kiev’s government. In the meantime, instability and violence in the eastern Ukraine escalated. The summer saw especially intense fighting between the eastern rebels and Ukrainian army.

### Explaining Russia’s Ukraine Policy

By the time of the Orange Revolution, Russia’s interests had already been largely constructed as in conflict with those of pro-Western leadership in Ukraine. Historical developments with roots in the Cold War contributed to it by generating Russia and the West’s mistrust in each other’s intentions and strengthening the exclusionary value dynamics. Since the mid-1990s, Russia viewed the process of NATO expansion as threatening its security interests. In addition to promoting separate understanding of security interests, the Revolution began the process of forming Russia’s values as principally divergent from those of the West.

In Russia’s perception, Yushchenko failed to recognize Russia’s values and interests by pushing Ukraine to gain membership in NATO, promoting memory of nationalist fighters against the Soviets during the Second World War, and elevating status of Ukrainian language at the expense of that of Russian. In particular, the Ukrainian president called for the official recognition of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) known for its crimes against Soviet citizens during the war and condemned during the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials.

What exacerbated the situation was that Western governments supported many of these policies. While challenging Russia not to meddle in Ukrainian elections in November 2004, the United States and the Euro-

pean Union provided considerable financial and political assistance for Yushchenko's campaign. The United States, strongly advocated MAP for Georgia and Ukraine. In 2008 Europeans proposed the Eastern Partnership (EP) program to build special ties with Ukraine and five other nations—Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan—yet failed to extend an invitation to Russia. The fact that the program was initially proposed by Poland, Latvia, and Sweden known to be especially critical of Russia arose the Kremlin's suspicion that the EP was a Trojan horse for getting them to NATO. Western nations also largely ignored Russia's proposed a new all-European treaty, the Ukrainian historical revisionism, and lack of respect for language diversity.

By the time of Yanukovich's election as Ukraine's president in the early 2010, Putin had grown skeptical of relations with the West. The U.S. continued to develop the Missile Defense System jointly with the Europeans but separately from Russia. Tensions over handling of the Middle Eastern crisis grew. The West also increased criticism of the Kremlin's *many other* violations of human rights. In response, Putin's discourse obtained a new, ideological dimension. Since his election campaign, he began to promote the vision of Russia as committed to defending particular values and principles relative to those of the West and other civilizations.

Russia's relations with Yanukovich's Ukraine improved considerably. Yanukovich renounced any aspirations to join NATO and accommodated Russia's desire to renew a long-term lease on stationing the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea. He also cancelled the law awarding the medal of Hero of Ukraine to Nazi collaborators and publicly renounced the interpretation of Holodomor as genocide against Ukrainians. Finally, in 2012 Rada passed a new law that gave Russian language the status

of a "regional language" by approving its use in public places in regions with Russians exceeding 10% of the total population. The Kremlin was also encouraged by Yanukovich's refusal to sign an Associate Membership Agreement with the EU in November 2013.

However, with the ascent of Arseny Yatsenyuk's coalition in Kiev, Moscow had reason to believe that Kiev would resume its drive to join NATO and denounce the Black Sea agreement with Russia. By intervening in Crimea, Putin acknowledged that his leverage against Kiev—largely based on natural gas supplies and personal ties with Ukrainian pragmatists—was insufficient to ensure Ukraine's neutral status and preserve Russian fleet in the Black Sea.

In addition to security interests, the Kremlin was concerned about historical and linguistic ties between the two nations. Steps that followed the Euromaidan revolution activated Moscow's suspicions that Kiev would break cultural and historical ties to Russia. Kiev canceled the law on Russian language. In response to Ukrainians obtaining Russian passports, some deputies in Rada proposed to punish the second (Russian) citizenship with ten years jail time. Rada also restricted Russian media coverage and formed a new government with a heavy representation of nationalist figures who trace their political roots to UPA. The Kremlin now viewed new Ukrainian values as incompatible with those of Russia. In his press-conference, Putin referred to Ukraine as the "rampage of Nazi, nationalist, and anti-Semitic forces."

Any solution to the crisis in Russia–Ukraine relations is impossible without alleviating the Kremlin's fears that Kiev would seek membership in NATO, promote a nationalistic, UPA-centered historical memory, and treat ethnic Russians as a fifth column.

#### *About the Author*

Andrei P. Tsygankov is Professor of International Relations and Political Science at San Francisco State University. His latest books are *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin* (Cambridge, 2012) and *The Strong State in Russia* (Oxford, 2014).

## EU–Russia Relations: Effects of the 2014 Ukraine Crisis

Maxine David, Guildford

### Abstract

The 2014 Ukrainian crisis has laid bare the differences between the European Union and Russia, forcing these two actors to re-examine their relations with each other, as well as with those in the so-called shared neighbourhood. The violence seen in Ukraine and arguably supported by Russia has shaken the EU out of any complacency it may have felt about the benign influence and effects of its integration project. The question therefore has to be asked, where now for EU–Russia relations? This article examines precisely that question. Argument focuses on the EU in particular, concluding it has two important challenges ahead. First, it can only forge a unified Russia policy if it debates rather than ignores the different foreign policy beliefs of its member states. Second, the EU must confront the reality of Russia today and decide on a policy that can divert the two actors from their current conflictual path but without paying the price in respect of the EU's self-professed normative identity.

The effects of Ukraine's troubles in 2014 have been felt across the European and Eurasian space. Those troubles reflect the persistent failure of successive political administrations in Ukraine to build a functioning political and economic system that can serve as the base for Ukrainian prosperity. However, Ukraine's crisis is not entirely home-made, Ukraine is part victim of geopolitics, forced by its economic woes and the effects of a global economy to choose between two competing regional projects, the European Union and Eurasian Economic Union. In the space of little more than six months, Ukraine has both rejected and signed an Association Agreement with the EU. Characterised by the EU as a "symbolic moment",<sup>1</sup> the June 2014 signing of the Agreement was indeed symbolic—of a rejection of the Russian-backed alternative. Ukraine was joined in the moment by Georgia and Moldova, a further sign that Russia was losing hold over the region. An optimistic analysis would conclude that states in the shared or common neighbourhood between the EU and Russia are able to make their own choices in respect of orientation westwards or eastwards. Such an analysis would be complacent in the extreme, given Russia's ongoing role in the Ukrainian territory. Ukraine's territorial integrity is still not assured and the EU can be of little or no help in securing it; there is the real risk that eastern Ukraine will become another frozen conflict. Additionally, Putin's hold on office and Russia's immediate internal stability are dependent on Russia retaining power in the region.

These are trying times, not least for EU–Russia relations. Ukraine's troubles have made clear just how vital these two actors are for the stability and prosperity of

the European space, widely conceived. In short, EU–Russia relations matter.

### Marking Failures

That 2014 is a significant year in EU–Russia relations is unquestionable, whether it will remain as the low point in their post-Cold War dealings is still a matter of speculation. In trying to answer the question of what the relationship will look like moving forward, most analysis to date has reflected on what has gone wrong, a necessary first step in determining the future path. There is much to reference here but I will concentrate on just four interrelated failings on the basis that they illuminate or relate most closely to the events of 2014.

First, the legal framework for the relationship remains, in some sense, unresolved. The basis continues to lie in the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), effective as of 1997 and designed to have a shelf life of ten years. Attempts to establish a new framework were ongoing from 2008 until March 2014 (halted by Russia's annexation of Crimea), the protracted negotiations reflecting different ideas about how the relationship should move forward. What is particularly striking here is that theoretical assumptions about the effects of an institutionalised relationship, such as that established by the PCA, have proven to be overly optimistic. Despite six monthly summits and a regularised framework for meetings between ministers and other officials, a gulf remains between the EU and Russia. From the EU perspective, this is of Russia's making. Ministers and officials are given limited stays in Brussels to ensure they are not socialised into the Brussels way of thinking and doing and Russia has proved willing to resist discussion of unpalatable issues, even to subvert EU agendas.<sup>2</sup>

1 European Union External Action Service (2014), <[http://eeas.europa.eu/top\\_stories/2014/270614\\_association\\_agreement\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2014/270614_association_agreement_en.htm)>

2 Private conversation with officials.

A second failure relates to the differences between EU member states that have made the construction of a single EU foreign policy a near-impossible task. Nowhere has this been more obvious than in respect of Russia. There remains, however, an interesting gap between what we understand at the theoretical level but expect in the realm of practice. Worth citing is the Renshon and Renshon insight that:

“It is unlikely that any researcher or critic can go wrong demonstrating how senior decision makers fail to measure up to an iconic and mythical model in which perceptual acuity is unaffected by character psychology cognitive limitations, information processes are not influenced by standard heuristic devices, and problem framing is not influenced by the efforts of existing and often strongly held belief systems.”<sup>3</sup>

Theorists of foreign policy analysis have long accepted that understanding how individual leaders make sense of the world is vital to understanding the nature of decision-making. In referencing the EU, we have perhaps all too often forgotten that decisions are the product of these individuals. Once we remember that leaders are themselves the product of their environments and that their decisions reflect individual viewpoints, values, history and cognitive processing, it becomes entirely unsurprising that EU foreign policy should often look amorphous, even contradictory. Until 2014, the voices of those who have been sceptical of Russian motivations and intentions, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, for example, have been relatively disregarded, in the greater interest of treating Russia as a strategic partner and not allowing personal bias to interfere in that process. In assuming *any* actor could be wholly rational and objective in its decision-making, the EU has not managed to harness effectively the range of members’ perspectives to agree an optimal Russia policy.

Third, there is the matter of Russia’s mistrust of EU motivations and intentions, especially as a result of continued enlargement and the European Neighbourhood and Eastern Partnership policies (ENP and EaP). The EU has again not been unaware of the issues and some sympathy has to be felt for the difficult choices it has faced. Russia’s fears could best be allayed by a drawing of clear boundaries around the EU, a clear and unambiguous declaration that the EU had expanded as far as it would. This would be a difficult and dangerous proposition, entailing discussion of what constituted the European identity, an inevitable ‘othering’ of those outside

and a politically unpalatable airing of dirty laundry as the differing opinions of the member states were laid bare. At a more normative level, the EU would be justifiably criticised for elevating Russia’s concerns about dealings with separate sovereign states above the rights of those self-same sovereign states. This would be to undermine all that the EU is supposed to be and to represent. Of course, in many ways, the ENP and EaP are precisely the signifiers of the EU boundaries, the consolation prize for those the EU does not anticipate welcoming as members. But as ever, it is perceptions that matter and Russia and many ENP and EaP states do not see partnership in these policies as exclusionary clauses in respect of eventual EU membership.

Finally, Brussels has not captured the depths of Russia’s perceptions of the EU, its suspicions, and the possible consequences of those. Insufficient emphasis on the separate roles of personality and ideology in the enactment and interpretation of foreign policy are the root causes of this failing. The EU must learn to hear those members which hold greater insight into the workings of the Russian political environment and the dominant personalities within it. In part, business interests have played their part in the over-optimistic calculations of certain states, Germany and Italy certainly but France too. The UK has been more circumspect given its own tribulations with Russia but even there the voices that counselled for a more robust approach did not hold sway. Liberal ideas about interconnectedness and interdependence have led such states to a belief that actors like Russia are constrained by their economic and political relations with others; under-theorised and under-employed in practice, however, is an understanding of the role of intervening variables and the calculations made in respect of them. In reality, foreign policy is about a series of trade-offs, including in respect of beliefs as leaders weigh up, for instance, security against freedom, economic prosperity against sovereignty, power against relations with others. Those EU member states whose own experiences told of greater risks failed to convince in terms that western European members could accept, their counsel was deemed to be over-personalised and, ironically, ideologically mis-informed.<sup>4</sup> The EU must do more to meet the challenge of avoiding prejudice while not ignoring meaningful and relevant information. It is well past time also for the EU to realise that its self-perception is not necessarily a shared one. This seems obvious but it is a matter side-stepped by the EU. Association

3 Renshon, Jonathan & Renshon, Stanley A. (2008) ‘The Theory and Practice of Foreign Policy Decision Making. *Political Psychology*, 29(4): pp. 509–536.

4 In conversations with EU officials undertaken in respect of other projects, this was a consistent theme, that the newer member states had to be socialised into the Brussels way and that their views of Russia were personal and rooted in ‘old’ ways of thinking.

and deepening integration with the EU are presented as a matter of democratic choice; often asked but never answered is how much choice neighbouring states really have in a globalising world with a large trading bloc on its doorstep. The EU needs to engage with this question.

Ultimately, what has been exposed in 2014 is a fundamental lack of trust on Russia's part, a surfeit of complacency on the EU's and a pressing need to reconceptualise the EU–Russia relationship. This will require the EU to look beyond its dominant ideological inclinations and to consider properly the separate belief systems of its member states and decide where this leaves Brussels in foreign policy-making terms. After that, the EU will need to look more deeply at Russia, to engage in the type of reflection that the “pulling and hauling” of its everyday politics with Russia understandably does not allow.

### The Way Forward in EU–Russia Relations

In respect of the first of these failures, no immediate action can be taken. EU sanctions against Russia remain in place and look set to do so for some time to come as long as Russia is perceived to be contributing to rather than resolving Ukraine's problems. However, this too shall pass and the EU will be left with the stark choice of resuming or rewriting relations with Russia. Mogherini, the new EU Foreign Affairs head, has declared that Russia is no longer a strategic partner,<sup>5</sup> suggesting a rewrite will ensue. This would be the most appropriate course of action. The EU cannot follow the same route it did after the 2008 hot war in Georgia, that is normalising relations as quickly as possible. Comparisons have understandably been drawn between Georgia and Ukraine but actually what is most notable is that after Georgia, Russia accepted the EU as broker in post-conflict resolution, precisely the opposite is true of Ukraine. The EU cannot escape the fact that Russia does not perceive it in benign terms and this must guide its own policy response.

Brussels must do more to understand the role of beliefs in its member states' foreign policies. Dwelling on Germany's response over Ukraine, for instance, is worthwhile. German business interests have most often been cited as explaining Germany's reluctance to impose sanctions and these certainly play a role. Also considered is the role of leadership in German–Russian relations, Merkel's relationship with Putin deemed less cosy than that of her predecessor and Merkel credited with achieving a more objective position on Russia; although

where that will or should take Germany is still debated. Relatively little attention has been paid to the nature of German foreign policy itself, however, how it most often reflects a conciliatory rather than conflictual approach and what that might mean for what is heard and decided in Brussels. The same consideration has to be given to those members with the longer and more exposed relationship with Russia, the Baltics, Finland and Poland to name the more obvious. NATO has understood the need for reassurance, the EU must do the same but also facilitate free and frank discussion of perceptions of Russia and policy proposals in respect of it. These will be difficult waters to navigate, what is at stake is the EU's identity as a normative power and it will have to work hard to resist a retreat from normativity when trying to assert its power. Nonetheless, to address both the second and fourth failings, the fears of all its member states must be treated as real and not dismissed as symptomatic of Cold War thinking.

In respect of the last two failures, the EU must stay its course. It cannot allow Russia to drive it into a situation where it effectively has a right of veto over EU affairs. This is not to say the Russian perspective should be ignored. The EU should continue to offer space for dialogue but the boundaries and expectations of what might be achieved need to be clear from the outset. Putin has made clear that Russia wants to rewrite the rules of the post-Cold War international system<sup>6</sup>. It would be all too easy to dismiss this as the product of a repressive and outmoded leader but there are elements in Putin's foreign policy discourse that warrant reflection on the EU's part, not least whether the European security architecture, of which the EU is part, is fit for purpose and whether it is overly inclusive or exclusive. At the very least, such an exercise should carve out the necessary space for understanding the Russian viewpoint from a less reactive, more measured perspective. The EU must be instrumental in bringing about a wider discussion that includes NATO, the OSCE and the Council of Europe. This will locate discussions about expectations of non-EU members within the wider context and so insulate the EU against more focused and unreasonable criticism.

### Existential Crises

2014 has delivered an unusually complex set of pressures, affirming some leaders' long-held views of Russia, challenging the views of others, forcing the EU to question the most basic elements of its relations with this challenging neighbour. The debates that the EU

5 In Valentino, Paolo (2014) 'Mogherini: Putin non rispetta i patti Ma la diplomazia resta l'unica strada'. *Corriere della Strada*, 1 Sept 2014, <[http://www.corriere.it/esteri/14\\_settembre\\_01/mogherini-putin-non-rispetta-patti-ma-diplomazia-resta-l-unica-strada-90968ad6-3197-11e4-a94c-7f68b8e9ffdd.shtml](http://www.corriere.it/esteri/14_settembre_01/mogherini-putin-non-rispetta-patti-ma-diplomazia-resta-l-unica-strada-90968ad6-3197-11e4-a94c-7f68b8e9ffdd.shtml)>

6 See, for instance, his speech to the Valdai Club in October 2014, <[http://valdaiclub.com/valdai\\_club/73300.html](http://valdaiclub.com/valdai_club/73300.html)>

will inevitably already be engaged in are unenviable. For its member states and the EU itself, Russia represents a varying existential case. States such as Lithuania and Poland believe Russia is a threat to their very existence, signalled by their invocation of NATO's Article 4 obligation to consult if a member feels threatened. Others believe that being forced into a course of action that is antithetical to European values is itself an existential crisis, that what the EU does in respect of Russia must be consistent with its identity as a normative power or the EU will itself become undefined and undefinable. 2014 has brought the EU into tricky territory, exposing the fissures in the European integration project. This is not in and of itself necessarily a bad thing. How the EU responds might be.

In policy-making circles, a weighing up of Russia's actions will have long been underway. The scales are not balanced in Russia's favour, there is little in its actions in either its foreign or domestic environments to suggest a charitable analysis should hold sway. The voices of certain central and eastern European states look prophetic

in the face of Russia's annexation of Crimea, its green men, its support of separatists in eastern parts of Ukraine, its "humanitarian aid" convoys that do not respect borders and its swift breach of the Minsk agreements, as signalled by its support of separate elections in the break-away regions of Luhansk and Donetsk. At home, Russia has passed ever more repressive laws that actively deny the rights of the LGBT communities, NGOs, journalists and political dissenters. State control of mainstream and social media has been tightened and legislation passed that constitutes early steps in bordering the internet. The EU has let many of the developments within Russia pass with little comment, consistent with a respect for sovereignty, but more consistent with an acceptance that it can do little to halt this retreat from liberal democratic principles. 2014 will remain infamous for many things, but it is vital the EU realise that its normative identity will not be served by keeping its head in the sand. Events call for a clear-eyed gaze and frank, even if regretful, assessment of the EU–Russia relationship as it is and not how the EU wishes it could be.

#### *About the Author*

Dr Maxine David is Lecturer in European Politics at the University of Surrey. She is a foreign policy analyst with particular expertise in Russian, EU and UK external relations. Her most recent work 'New Social Media: Modernisation and Democratisation in Russia' will be published in the first issue of *European Politics and Society* in 2015, available now in early view.

## ANALYSIS

### Central Asia's Dilemmas and the Paradoxical Lessons of the Ukrainian Crisis

Marlene Laruelle, Washington, D.C.

#### **Abstract**

Factoring in Central Asia's perception of the Ukrainian crisis means above all acknowledging: 1. The lack of factual data such as sociological surveys on which an analysis could rely; and 2. accepting to put each element of the sentence in the plural: there are several Central Asias, and several Ukrainian crises. Each of the five Central Asian countries has its own perception of the Ukrainian crisis. Each of these perceptions is far from monolithic and can be divided into several components—very schematically, political regimes, intellectual elites and activists, and public opinion. And there are at least three Ukrainian crises—EuroMaidan, Crimea, and Eastern Ukraine—each with a distinct meaning: street revolution against a regime, annexation of part of the territory, and new secessionist conflict.

#### **A Majority Pro-Russian Stance**

In the five countries of Central Asia the political authorities have all issued relatively similar statements: all have appealed for a peaceful resolution to the crisis, and have called for the avoidance of military engagement and civilian victims. They have recognized the legitimacy

of the Crimean referendum, with Nazarbayev going as far as to call the government in Kiyv "neo-fascist." Only Kyrgyzstan has done some jockeying by first recognizing Maidan as a legitimate change of power, before going back on its declaration. This massive pro-Russian stance differs from that adopted by Central Asian states dur-



ing the war of August 2008, following which they did not recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Obviously these pro-Russian declarations are the official ones, where the point is to please Russia, but it is also evident that the Central Asian leaders are anxious. Nazarbayev, upset with the entry of Armenia into the Eurasian Economic Union against his country's wishes, has insisted on the fact that belonging to Eurasian institutions only makes sense if it brings positive results for Kazakhstan, and if not the country could leave the Eurasian construction. This raised the ire of Putin, who, during the Seliger summer camp, threatened Kazakhstan in barely concealed words by claiming that "Kazakhs had never had statehood." So paradoxically Kazakhstan is both the most pro-Russian state in Central Asia and the one that, precisely because it is a key member of the Eurasian Union project and the most targeted by potential Russian retaliations, can afford to make some open criticisms and stand up for its sovereignty. The other states of the region are either entirely dependent on Moscow with far lesser room for maneuver (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan), or else more autonomous but also less directly concerned by Russia's reassertion (Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan).

In each country of Central Asia the regimes are much more concerned by the potential risks of a Maidan—or any type of "colored revolution"—occurring at home than by threats to their territorial sovereignty. They are right in their assessment: Ukraine lost part of its sovereignty not because Vladimir Putin suddenly decided he would act to annex Crimea and destabilize Eastern Ukraine, but because the authorities in Kyiv were defeated by the EuroMaidan protests. If Yanukovitch had not left power in the conditions that he did, Ukraine would probably still be a unified state. Similar to the Tajik civil war from 1992–1997 and the two Kyrgyz revolutions in 2005 and 2010, in Central Asia democratic processes, the challenging of power of competing elites and street actions are apprehended as direct paths to state collapse and the jeopardizing of national sovereignty. The lesson was well learnt in Central Asia, in particular in Kazakhstan: if the country wants to prevent Moscow from peering into its internal problems, it has to avoid a presidential succession that could turn into an intra-elite conflict.

Even if the other Central Asian regimes have no common borders with Russia, in theory they could be affected from potential pressure from Moscow. Kyrgyzstan is open to pressure through its Russian minority, but also and more importantly via its labor migrants and dual citizens. As in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and to a lesser degree Uzbekistan, many labor migrants are also dual citizens, not merely the Russian minority. (Only

Turkmenistan would appear to be sheltered.) As for Uzbekistan, the government is concerned about sudden appeals being made to autonomy from the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan, which has discretely attempted to rekindle its traditional mistrust of Tashkent and its decided sympathy for neighboring Kazakhstan. Preparations for the parliamentary elections in December 2014 and presidential elections in early 2015 in Uzbekistan, and of parliamentary elections in Tajikistan in February 2015 is aggravating sensitivities; the regimes know that this moment is one of potential political risks, and that now, in addition to the risk of jeopardizing the current status quo, there is the possibility of Moscow's direct or indirect involvement. As a result, the Tajik authorities have recently clamped down on social media such as Facebook, and have implemented repressive measures against the traditional opposition of the Islamic Rebirth Party and against the political agitations of the Tajik diaspora in Russia.

The intellectual elites and activists are more divided than the regimes. Those with nationalist feelings or those reading Western sources, often via internet and social media, seem to share a relatively pro-Ukrainian stance, either in the name of the fight against "Russian imperialism," or in support of the democratic values and Western orientations showed by the Maidan people. On the other side of the spectrum, the Soviet-trained elites and the Russian speaking population tend to adhere to Moscow's perception. This divide probably goes hand-in-hand with some generation gap (nationalists or pro-Westerners are proportionally younger than the Soviet trained elites and the Russian minorities) but there are insufficient studies to confirm that impression. The division is most glaring in Kazakhstan, where a movement of young nationalist activists has emerged and is spreading with relative success slogans against the Customs Union and the Eurasian Union.

Among the population, it is very hard to come with reliable information in the form of sociological surveys. However, pace the West's wishful thinking, the Russian interpretation of the Ukrainian crisis seems to prevail. Explaining this pro-Russian stance by evoking "Russian propaganda" is a simplistic and biased analysis of Central Asian public opinion. The memory of the trauma of early 1990s—a collapsing economy hampering individual life projects—is projected onto Ukraine, which is viewed as a state that is close to economic and political failure, as a state with corrupt elites that lack any long-term vision of statehood. Russia, on the contrary, is largely supported by Central Asian public opinion. It is seen as a "born again" country that has been able to avoid the path of state collapse, has revived its economy, and reasserted itself as a great power on the inter-

national scene. Russia's economic successes are embodied in grassroots descriptions given by Central Asian labor migrants of their stays in Russia, and their ability to send remittances home.

### Short- and Long-Term Consequences

Western pundits who consider that Central Asia's dominant pro-Russian stance during the Ukrainian crisis can be explained only by recourse to Russia's hard power and media propaganda are missing part of the picture. The Central Asian regimes are as supportive as Moscow of any established regimes, of media control, and of avoiding positive reports on any popular action that would challenge the political status quo, at home or abroad. Maidan has been interpreted as a direct threat to all the regimes without them having to listen to Russian media or to follow "Moscow's hand." Perceptions among the public, the majority of whom probably share the Russian interpretation, rest heavily on the traumas of the 1990s and on migrants' personal stories of their lives in Russia, which thus gives preeminence to Russian-oriented readings. Last but not least, the frames through which the world is perceived are deeply shaped by conspirological schemes, in which Ukraine is nothing but a pawn in the West's long-term and "civilizational" struggle against Russia. Dismissing these perceptions as irrational doesn't help us to understand why they make sense in the current social and cultural context of Central Asia.

The consequences of the Ukrainian crisis for Central Asia are multiple. Short term, it has obviously reinforced Russia's influence in the region, and sheds new light on Moscow's desire to advance the Eurasian Union project and strengthen the Collective Security Treaty Organization. The Central Asian states feel that, were there to be serious discord with Moscow, they are now in greater jeopardy. Although it must be recognized that Moscow has never played the hand of the "Russian minorities" with them, contrary to the way it has in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and the Baltic states.

The Ukrainian crisis has also made the Central Asian authorities more reticent about challenging Moscow by welcoming Western initiatives, and has profoundly discredited the West. The mainstream perception of the US accumulating defeats in Afghanistan, Syria, and now Iraq, and its failure to protect Ukraine's territory and international law does not encourage anyone to take risks in its favor. Central Asian regimes and populations thus have to fall back on a very realist perception of international relations, in which what counts foremost are concrete relations of power, the force of geography, of history, and of economic presence, and not aspirational principles. However, at the same time, for the regimes and the elites, fears of yielding on their

famed "multi-vectorial" approach to foreign policy and of finding themselves facing Moscow with only China as a partner, ought to encourage more refined the adoption of "third neighborhood" policy strategies. It is, however, unlikely that Western countries will benefit from this, especially not when they push a normative agenda in matters of human rights and of democratization. Priority will probably be given to second-order states in Asia or in the Middle-East, and to multilateral institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

On a medium- and long-term scale, Russia has weakened its legitimacy in the region. In the 2000s, Putin invested a lot in normalizing the country and its relations with the Central Asian states, wanting to appear as a stable, reliable, and predictable partner. It invested in a China-inspired economic "good neighborhood." However, suddenly we see the return of the specter of Russia playing with hybrid war tools, including fomenting domestic instabilities. Seen from Central Asia, the main issue is not so much a powerful and assertive Russia but an unpredictable one, for which the red lines not to be crossed are not made explicit (although they had in fact been explicit for Ukraine). Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan seem largely isolated from any direct risk and are able to manage asymmetrical relations with Russia, while Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan really do not have any future outside of maintaining privileged relations with Russia.

It is for Kazakhstan that the consequences are the most problematic. The regime may face decreasing levels of pro-Russian public opinion, which the next president will have to take into consideration, and a potential overlap between intra-elite tensions with resources sharing and geopolitical orientations that Russia could use to its advantage. More importantly maybe is the fact that the Kazakh elites, backed in this by widespread popular support, are nothing other than pro-Kazakhstan. Any supranational institutions that would limit Kazakhstan's political autonomy will be steadily refused, with the hope that Moscow will not consider them as being its new "red lines." Social consensus in Kazakhstan being built on the improvement of living standards, the failure of the Customs Union/Eurasian Economic Union to show real positive influence on the Kazakh economy would also impact negatively Russia's legitimacy in the country and the conciliatory narrative of the Kazakh authorities. Whatever the future looks like, Kazakhstan will continue to search for other trade partners to avoid not only the political risk of being too dependent on Moscow, but also the economic risks that being too reliable on Russian economy may bear.

For this is the true paradox of the crisis: despite their discontent about Russia's reassertion and the concerns about maintaining sovereignty, the Central Asian states,

in particular Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and to a lesser extent Uzbekistan, are obliged to hope that Russia's economy will continue to blossom and not collapse. If international sanctions seriously impair Russia's development, the repercussions on the Kazakh economy, on Russian investments in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—which have already been affected by the rapid price increase of Russian fuel—and on the millions of Central Asian households whose future depends on remittances would be terrible and ultimately dangerous

for the legitimacy of the established regimes. Through good times and bad, a prosperous Russia is what the Central Asians have to hope for. The second conclusion is that during the Ukrainian crisis preserving state sovereignty has aligned with regime security. The slogan to sum this up could well be: to avoid the destiny of Crimea, don't have a Maidan at home. This will certainly not contribute to the democratization of the Central Asian regimes.

*About the Author*

Marlene Laruelle is the Director of the Central Asia Program at the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (IERES) at the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs.

**ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST**

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Research Centre for East European Studies • Publications Department • Klagenfurter Str. 3 • 28359 Bremen • Germany

Phone: +49 421-218-69600 • Telefax: +49 421-218-69607 • e-mail: [fsopr@uni-bremen.de](mailto:fsopr@uni-bremen.de) • Internet: <[www.css.ethz.ch/publications/RAD\\_EN](http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/RAD_EN)>