Origins and developments of the Crisis in Ukraine. 06/04/2014

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Ukraine's Geographical History

The name "Ukraine", derived from the Old East Slavic word ukraina (оукраина), is traditionally interpreted as "borderland" and was used for border regions of the Rus'.(1) This borderland has a long history of geographical changes that have important significance for the current situation the country is in. Samuel Huntington predicted in his book "The Clash of Civilizations" that this clash would cut right through Ukraine: "a civilizational approach … highlights the possibility of Ukraine splitting in half, a separation which cultural factors would lead one to predict might be more violent than that of Czechoslovakia, but far less bloody than that of Yugoslavia."(2)

Ukraine and the 1921 Peace of Riga

Ukraine entered the 20th century as a divided country. The Western part, called Galicia, fell under the Habsburg Empire and the Eastern part under the Russian empire. After the First World War had destroyed the Habsburg Empire and the Russian Revolution in 1917 had put an end to the tsarist regime, the Ukrainians declared their independent state on 28 January 1918. On 22 January 1919, the Ukrainian People's Republic was formally united with the West Ukrainian People's Republic. This uniting was, however, undone when the West Ukrainian National Government's Army lost the war against Poland and the Red army defeated the Ukrainian Army in Kiev later that same year.(3)(4)

With the Peace of Riga, signed on the 18 March 1921 by Russia and Poland, Ukraine was officially dismantled as an unitary country.(5) The treaty ended Polish-Soviet war and transferred the west of Ukraine to Poland and transformed the east into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.(6) The Russian Civil War which was sparked by the Russian Revolution in 1917 ended with the victory of the Bolshevists in 1920.(7) Ukraine became one of the founding members of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), better known as the Soviet Union.(8) And as a consequence of the Peace of Riga, the Crimean peninsula- the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic- also became part of the Soviet Union.(9)

Soviet Ukraine

After the Russian war, Moscow allowed Ukrainian culture and language to enjoy a short revival as part of the Soviet indigenization policy: Ukrainisation. This policy was used in 1923 until 1933 to strengthen Soviet power in the territory of Soviet Ukraine and to legitimize Soviet rule in Ukrainian eyes. However when the Ukrainian elite, fostered by Ukrainisation, started to defend the Ukrainian peasants from the depredations during the collectivization of agriculture, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin changed his mind. Stalin responded by revoking the Ukrainisation policy. And issued the elimination of the elite and a state-ordered Famine, the Holodomor, on the Ukrainians.(10) Because millions were killed by this famine, Stalin imported large numbers of Russians and other Soviet citizens to repopulate the east of Ukraine.(11)

Just before the invasion of Poland in 1939, which marks the beginning of the Second World War, Ukraine was re-united under The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. This pact added Western Ukrainian lands, previously owned by Poland, to the Soviet Union.(12) During the second World War, the Ukrainian Red Army fought continuously for 72 days against the German armies in 1941 in Kiev but ultimately failed to stop them. The Nazis occupied Ukraine until 1944 and the war left the country heavily damaged.(13) After the Red Army regained power over Ukraine and the Crimea, the forced deportations of the Tatar population of the Crimea to Central Asia began. Stalin accused the entire population of collaborating with the German Nazis. These deportations resulted in a predominantly Russian Crimea.(14) In addition, the Kremlin began to intensify the "Russification" of Ukraine. This policy aimed at "entrenching and reinforcing Russian national and political domination". Non-Russians were forced to switch to the Russian language and culture and the Ukrainian language was banned. The reason for this policy was the belief that a Soviet Union with one language- the Russian language- would be a stronger union. The policy proved successful, especially in Kiev and eastern Ukrainian cities.(15)

A New Soviet Leader and the Return of (the) Crimea to Ukraine

The death of Stalin was followed by the rising of Nikita Khrushchev as the new leader of the USSR in 1953. Khrushchev began to emphasize the friendship between the Ukrainian and Russian nations. And in 1954 he transferred the Crimea from the Russian SFSR to the Ukrainian SSR as a gift. This transfer was done to mark the 300th anniversary as part of the Russian empire.(16)

With Russian as the predominant language and about 60 percent of the population consisting of Russians, the Crimean population saw itself as different from the Ukrainian mainstream.(17) Russian separatists living in the Crimea called upon Moscow to retain power over Crimea. They felt that the port city of Sevastopol, built on Russian military might, was essential for Russian security. Russia and Ukraine dealt with the issue by the granting Russia to base its Black Sea fleet in the harbor of Sevastopol.(18)(19) This stationing is allowed under a renewed lease until 2042 and allows Russia to protect its military-strategic interests in Eastern Europe. (20) (21)

The Independent State of Ukraine

During the end of the Soviet Union, on 16 July 1990, the Declaration of State Sovereignty of Ukraine was adopted by Ukraine's new parliament.(22) This was followed by the adopting of the Act of Independence, on 24 August 1991, in which Ukraine was declared as an independent democratic state. On 1 December 1991, the Ukrainian government held a nationwide referendum in which 93% of the citizens of Ukraine voted for an independent Ukraine and chose Leonid Kravchukas the first democratically elected President. In (the) Crimea 54% of the voters favored independence from Russia- this constituted the lowest majority found in Ukraine- and the Crimea agreed to remain a part of Ukraine as a autonomous region.(23)

In the end of 1994, Ukraine began to reestablish authority over Crimea and in 1995 it removed Crimea's separatist leader and the Crimean constitution was revoked.(24) The Crimean parliament adopted in that same year a new constitution that was not acknowledged by the Ukrainian government until 1998.(25) With the installation of Viktor Yushchenko, who was not backed by Moscow, as the president of Ukraine, the 300-year domination of Ukraine by Moscow ended in 2005.(26)

In 2012 the Ukrainian Parliament adopted the law "On the principles of the state language policy". This law was aimed to give Russian and other minority languages the status of "regional language" and the Ukrainian language to remain the only official countrywide language.(27) In Ukraine the Russian language is native to 29.3% of the citizens and the ethnic Russians form half of the Russian-speaking population.(28) A proposal to repeal the law, making Ukrainian the sole state language, was adopted by the Supreme Council of Ukraine on 23 February 2014. But this repeal was vetoed by acting President Oleksandr Turchynov on 28 February 2014, after ordering a working-group to draft a new law to "accommodate the interests of both eastern and western Ukraine and of all ethnic groups and minorities."(29)

Recent developments

In March 2014, after months of fights between supporters and opponents of the Yanukovych government, Crimea voted to join Russia and Moscow annexes the Crimea, move that Ukraine says it will never accept.(30)

After the referendum on the Crimea and its annexation by Russia, the city of Donetsk is the next to show its aspirations to join Russia. The city of Donetsk, that borders with Russia, has a high percentage of ethnic Russians and 74.9 percent of its citizens has Russian as its mother tongue.(31) The pro-Russian protesters have been holding rallies daily in Donetsk, but so far the requested referendum has not been granted.(32)

Political Structure

The political structure of Ukraine has gone through numerous changes over the last 30 years and applying to the latest perturbations in this region- this process is very far from being completed. Ukraine got its independence from Soviet Union on August 24 at 1991, though the first oppositional political organizations were registered in 1990. At 1990 the CPU/CPSU (Communist Party of Ukraine- the ruling party) had a dominating position as the role of the only legal political party in Ukraine at that time (Elections 1990 – 86%)(33). In comparison, in the Baltic nations opposition gained between 65 and 74% and in Russia the number was about 40% (34).

In March 1994 the first free elections to the Verkhovna Rada were held and only about 30% of all newly elected parliamentarians were members of political parties, others being independent candidates. That represents a strong trend of decreasing in political identification that changed only in 1998 by growing significance of party affiliation, resulting in 30% of non-affiliated candidates in 2002. CPU lost its status and the trust of the voters over time, freeing up some room for the opposition. In fact, the Ukrainian political system,in spite of its weakness, was able to drive out from CPU monopoly into proportional representation of the interests of the ruling party and the opposition. From 1994 the institutionalization has been progressing steadily, increasing the number of registered parties from 1 to 19 (2002)(33).

From 2002 the composition of the government in Ukraine had become more homogeneous with representation of the candidates from different regions and political parties. The decision-making process was controlled by the president power and overall the political situation remained stable. But nevertheless, lists of the Cabinet of Ministers in Ukraine for 2010 and for 2013 express dramatic change in content. In 2010 there is a relatively fair proportion of independent candidates, dominant party and the opposition parties, but in 2013 Party of Regions has more than 90% of seats, what reminds of the structure in 1990. After the victory of Victor Yanukovich, the Cabinet of Ministers was renewed significantly (almost 75%)(33). Ukrainian and international experts constantly state the lack of publicity on draft government decisions which leads to numerous troubles and misunderstandings on crucial points and agreements. Sometimes decisions are made without proper discussion and calculation of consequences (the law "On Disposal of Vehicles" of 4 July, 2013), which made the government further harm its corrupted reputation and decrease the trust of society and businessmen (35).

Overall, the Ukrainian political system became more monopolistic by 2013 headed by Victor Yanukovich with the Party of Regions' support. The representation of experienced professionals dramatically went down since 2010, and the spectrum of delegated responsibilities went up. Obviously, in 2013 the Ukrainian government was operated by the only political party reserving few spaces for opposition and independent candidates what leaded to revolution predisposition (35).

Development of the Conflict

The protests in Ukraine have led to the flight of the former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, after violent riots lead to the death of tens of protesters and members of the security forces. Since the end of February, a new government has been created by the political

parties and factions which are part of the Euromaidan movement. One of the first acts of the government was to vote on February 23 2014 an amendment ending the law "On the principles of the state language policy", opening the way to the ban of Russian and minority languages in Ukraine. This amendment was later vetoed by the Acting President Oleksandr Turchynov on February 28 2014. (37) After the vote of this new amendment, protesters clashed with pro-Euromaidan supporters and ethnic Tatars at the front of the Parliament of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea on February 26 2014. In this region are also present military installations of the Russian Navy. Paramilitaries without official insignias linked to the Russian Federation entered in Crimea on February 27 2014, seized the Parliament of Crimea, supported the new de facto pro-Russia Crimean authorities and started to besiege the Ukrainian military installations. (38)(39) The Russian troops close to the eastern border of Ukraine were placed on alert and the Russian Navy blocked the naval installations of the Ukrainian Navy. Further protests took place in cities with an important Russian-speaking community in Ukraine such as Donetsk, Lugansk, Karkhiv and Odessa. On March 13 2014, clashes turned deadly in Donetsk (40) and on March 14 2014, a mortal firefight between rival protesters took place in Kharkiv. Accusations were made of "agents provocateurs" stirring troubles in Ukraine to prepare an invasion by the Russian troops. (41) The de facto authority of Crimea prepared a referendum for the 16th of March 2014 on the secession of Crimea from Ukraine to become a territory of the Russian federation.

This call for independence made the Muslim Tatar community of Crimea uncomfortable who fear a return of Crimea to Russian control. Tatars in Crimea had suffered from Joseph Stalin's policy in 1944 when they were deported to Central Asia. There have been cases of Tatars leaving Crimea due to fear of violence against them. (42) However, the new Crimean authorities promised to protect them. (43) Vladimir Putin (President of the Russian Federation) spoke by phone with the representative of the Crimean Tatar Community, Mustafa Jemilev, to discuss the future of the Tatar Community. Jemilev said that the Crimean Independence Referendum was illegitimate and would be boycotted by the Crimean Tatar Community. (44) The anxieties of the Tatar Crimean Community encouraged Turkey to discuss with the Russian Federation the rights of the Crimean Tatars. (45)

Despite a slow response from NATO to the movement of the Russian troops, the military organisation has deployed fighter jets in the Baltic States and AWACS type planes were sent to fly close to the Ukrainian borders in Poland and Romania from March 5 2014. US Navy ships were also present in the Black Sea for training with the Romanian and Bulgarian Navies. (46)Fighter Jets of the Russian Air Forces have been sent to Belarus in reaction to the moves of NATO and the Russian Navy has carried out military drills in the Mediterranean. (47) The situation is extremely tense with representatives of the United Nations and observers of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe being intimidated by pro-Russian militiamen while doing their mission in Crimea. (48) The failure of these organisations to stop this rivalry between Russia and the western organisations and States, such as the EU, NATO and the USA reveal their weakness to resolve tensions between major countries.

It seems that only the interdependence of Russia, the EU and the USA is stopping a wider confrontation. A conflict would end Russian energy exports to the EU and hurt the European economy. For Russia, this would mean the end of important revenues and European investments from which the internal Russian economy depends on. It would be very difficult for the USA or any other energy providers to replace Russia's energy exports to the EU. Recent visa and economic sanctions from both sides will affect the world economy.

This crisis has revealed the weakness of the EU and NATO in supporting a country which wants to increase ties with these two organizations, changing the perceptions that countries have of these organizations. The legality of the Russian action in Crimea could affect the rest of the world. Restive regions in the Russian Federation could use the case to call for self-determination. Also, territories with limited-international recognition could also call to be unified with a larger State. The break-away territory of Transnistria in Moldova has called to be united with Russia. Also in Moldova, a recent referendum carried out in Gagauzia saw a huge majority vote to develop closer links with the Commonwealth of Independent States Custom Union and even declare independence in the case of Moldova lose or surrender its independence. Gagauzians fear that Moldova could decide to join Romania. (49) In the Caucasus, the Azeri territory of Nagorno-Karabakh under Armenian control could be encouraged to unite with the territory of the Armenian State. A new order in this part of the world is in the making.

Reflection

We should not lose our faculty of discernment under the pressure of the media noise created around the Ukrainian crisis. The lack of objectivity of the international press is obvious and there is a real sensationalism provoked by the rapid evolution of the events. Indeed, a return to the atmosphere of the Cold War would benefit nobody. However, this is what could happen if the West keeps on personifying and criticizing Russia in a harsh way (using the personality of Putin) and if Russia remains seemingly arrogant, impertinent and unwilling to cooperate.

Russia and the West assess the crisis in Ukraine differently. Russia did not realize that the EU would be so attractive for the Ukrainian people, while the EU did not pay great attention to Russia's Customs Union project of for a long time. Russia was humiliated after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as it lost its predominant place on the international scene. Now Russia is taking its revenge and feels responsibility to protect the ethnic Russian population of Ukraine This behavior is unacceptable for the Western powers, which challenge its legitimacy. But the EU idealizes the protest movement in Ukraine and underestimates the role of the extreme right-wing participants. The West perceives Russia as an aggressor yet does not have the means to respond. Indeed, the sanctions taken do not frighten Russia, which on the contrary feels rather confident and did not hesitate to take measures against the West.

This confrontation between East and West, mixing geopolitics and human rights, can easily lead to disillusion for the Ukrainian people. The IMF has agreed a \$14 billion to \$18 billion bailout for Ukraine on March 27 2014. An austerity plan will be implemented. The pro-European part of the population will support these reforms, as it thinks that nothing can be worse than the actual economic situation. The economic development of the EU is very attractive to the citizens of this country with a desperate economic situation which has not even improved since the collapse of the USSR. But these reforms will be very painful for the poorest parts of the population.

Ukraine needs the EU in order to adopt the norms and values which conform to the rule of law. The anger of Ukrainian citizens against corrupted rulers is legitimate. They want a government they can trust. But Ukraine should not forget that the EU does not propose any perspective of EU-integration. Ukraine should not forget the cultural and economic ties it has with Russia. In fact, the geographical position of Ukraine makes it an actor, which cannot

isolate itself from Europe or Russia. A large part of the Ukrainian population does work in Russia and sends a large amount of remittances to the families living in Ukraine. There are a lot of mixed marriages between Ukrainians and Russians. Russia and Ukraine do have very emotional ties, due to cultural and historical reasons.

Further cooperation of the EU with the post-soviet space will be very difficult for the EU if it does exclude Russia. The Western Partnership put in place by the EU shows that the EU does not have a real and differentiated comprehension of the post-soviet states. If the EU and Russia really want to help these countries and do not only want to increase their power, they need to cooperate and to put their competences together.

It is of first importance to underline the will and the interests of the Ukrainian population itself. Ukraine should stop looking simultaneously at the West and at the East, trying to get economic advantages, which would only benefit to corrupted elite. Ukraine has to act in the interest of the major part of its population. The problem is that the EU, the USA and Russia do not understand that they cannot force the country to choose between two identities, without splitting the country. Even if Crimea is now a part of Russia and Ukraine became more homogeneous, there are a lot of Russian-speaking citizens in Ukraine. Ukraine needs to be a bridge between the West and the East, without being subordinated to anybody.

The government, which will be elected in May, is of first importance, as it should take crucial measures with a new legitimacy. But perspectives on the short and long term still remain unclear. The only certain point is that misperceptions and mistrust are key problems of the Ukrainian crisis.

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