

Background

Historical ethnic conflicts behind the Ukrainian crisis: one country, numerous identities

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The current Ukrainian crisis is interpreted in many different ways on the international political stage. It can be seen as a fight between Russia and the USA, as Ukraine's choice between Western and Eastern values or simply as a dispute over economic interests. But it is highly important to note that there are centuries-long ethnic and cultural reasons that lie behind the crisis and as long as these internal conflicts are not solved, the tensions are not likely to decrease.

Ukraine is a traditionally diverse country in the matter of languages, ethnicities and culture. Currently, there are approximately 130 nationalities living under Kiev's rule, the biggest of which is the Russian minority with 17.3 per cent. Each of the other nationalities' – like Belorussian, Moldovan or Crimean Tatar – percentage is under one per cent, making the current conflict mainly the Russians' and the Ukrainians' fight.

After having a look at Ukraine's political map it is immediately seen that the most significant division is between the Western and Eastern part of the country which can be tracked back to historical reasons. The Western part was traditionally ruled by European powers such as Poland and the Austro-Hungarian Empire with a strong influence of Catholicism. These rulers welcomed Ukrainian national movements and let different thinkers to promote romanticism and arts. In the meantime, since the 17th century, a strong Russian imperial rule prevailed in

the Eastern area, mainly with ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking Ukrainian residents. Because of the traditions, the Orthodox Church has always remained dominant here. Moreover, during the centuries these aforementioned three big empires fought over the territory of the country, creating even more socio-cultural cleavages.

Similar trends can be observed in the Crimean peninsula as well, which was a part of Russia - later the USSR – until 1954 when Nikita Khrushchev gave it to Ukraine. Currently, about 58.3 per cent of the residents is Russian, while only 24 per cent is Ukrainian and 12 Crimean Tatar – noting that around 98 per cent is native Russian speaker. During all this time, the region has not really identified itself with the central government. Mostly, the population supports the 1992 constitution, when for a brief moment the Crimea had its own president with the right for autonomous foreign policy. Moreover, this area is an essential part of the Russian national identity; the majority of Russians still criticizes Khrushchev for his step.

Considering the fact that the country as a whole was a part of the Soviet Union - creating some kind of identity unity - might be misleading. As previously mentioned, the Eastern parts belonged to Russian rule from the 17th century while some Western regions did not have similar experiences until the end of World War II and the formation of the Soviet Union. As the whole system collapsed in 1991, it did not even last even for 50 years, not giving the opportunity to these areas to adapt to the new circumstances.

During the Soviet times there were ethnic clashes, but never on the agenda as according to the Communist perception, they did not even exist. After the fall of the USSR, the conditions changed and the political decision-makers had to do something with the situation: creating a unified country and a unique Ukrainian identity from these diverse ethno-linguistic groups. In the beginning, the political leadership tried not to choose sides and treat the Ukrainian nationality as a whole. But during the years, the whole political rhetoric turned into other direction, making the society even more divided.

Basically two kinds of political rhetoric were formed: the pro-Russian Eastern and the nationalist Western one. The result of this kind of vote-seeking method can be seen in the 2010 election results as well; the Western areas almost fully voted for Tymoshenko, while the Eastern for Yanukovich with Yanukovich winning. This indicates that due to this one-sided politics, the citizens voted solely according to their national identities and did not consider the candidates' possible political steps. The nationalism that was supposed to build a Ukrainian nation, just torn the society apart: all of those who lived there as an ethnic or religious

minority voted for Yanukovych, suggesting that he was the only candidate that intended to consider any other nationality in the leadership than Ukrainian.

The tensions came to the surface in the end of 2013 when Yanukovych did not sign the utmost important deal with the European Union, indicating that the country would better choose Russia and the Moscow-led Eurasian Union. The East-West division was clearly accompanied with a choice between East and West; while in the 2004–2005 Orange Revolution the whole society agreed to some point, the Euromaidan became a protest of the nationalist, pro-Europe West against the pro-Russian East.

According to many international experts, the crisis has gone so far that creating a Ukrainian nation might be simply impossible. Even the interim government that was supposed to ensure a well-balanced and representative leadership could not follow its own principles in the middle of the crisis. In the new government there were only two ministers from the Eastern part out of the total twenty, despite the fact that this area makes up the half of the whole country's population and produces a major part of the GDP. In the meantime, the Svoboda nationalist party got three key positions: the deputy ministerial, the general prosecutorial and the defense ministerial one.

As seen, even without the international conflict Ukraine has a lot to solve on its own as soon as possible. The national consensus is more important than ever as the country can be a stage of bigger international conflicts just as long as the society is torn apart by these many historical and cultural cleavages. According to international observers, the current form of the state is simply not sustainable and does not worth to fight for. The succession and the strong decentralization can both be solutions, but hard to enforce legally thorough any government which makes the future uncertain for 44 million Ukrainian citizens.

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