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David MANDEL

**“The conflict in Ukraine.”**

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[83]

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The conflict in Ukraine has multiple dimensions - international, political, socio-economic, cultural, ideological - that interact in complex ways. Moreover, its analysis is further complicated by the intensive informational war that has accompanied it. Attitudes towards the conflict are divided, not only between Left and Right but also within with those two poles. This article makes no claim to neutrality either. It offers only some elements of analysis to help a reader make his or her own evaluation.

The immediate background to the conflict was President Yanukovich's hesitation in signing an Association Agreement with the European Union that he had negotiated. He was worried about the economic and social consequences for Ukraine, and especially for its industry, which is concentrated in the east, his political base. The EU was offering little by way of aid to cushion the Ukrainian economy through the required transition to its standards. Meanwhile, Russia, still hoping to attract Ukraine into the customs union it was sponsoring, offered a $15-billion loan without the EU's painful conditions.

Yanukovich's volte-face provoked demonstrations on the Maidan in Kiev in the fall of 2013 that continued into the winter. The demonstrators were motivated by the vague notion that the association agreement held the key to an effective fight against Ukraine's endemic corruption and would open the way to its prosperous development. Of course, the agreement would also ease visa requirements to entering the EU. (Ukraine since independence has witnessed a vast emigration.) The demonstrations grew in numbers and in force in response to repressive measures adopted by the government and with the growing presence of ultra-nationalist - and so, by definition in the Ukrainian context, anti-Russian - elements, mainly from Ukraine's western regions.

An agreement to end the stand-off was brokered by EU and Russian diplomats and signed by Yanukovich and opposition leaders on 21 February 2014. It provided for the reduction of presidential powers, early elections under new electoral laws, amnesty of arrested protesters, and the surrender of illegal weapons and occupied public buildings. [[1]](#footnote-1) But the agreement was aborted by an armed uprising of neo-fascist activists and the death of over a hundred protesters and police from sniper fire from far-right elements. [[2]](#footnote-2) This provoked Yanukovich's flight and departure from the country, and was followed by the formation of an interim government led by nationalist politicians. The new government received immediate recognition by the Western states.

But the Russian government saw what had taken place as an illegitimate *coup d'État,* yet another case of Western-fomented, or at least encouraged, "regime change" (Western [84] diplomats had been prominent on the Maidan in support of the protest), part of NATO's "containment" policy towards Russia, which had included, among other things, NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe and its 2008 decision eventually to include Georgia and Ukraine; its bombing in 1999 of Yugoslavia, a traditional Russian ally, without UN sanction; the United States' abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002 and its planned deployment of interceptors in Poland and Romania, and much else. Moscow reacted to the events in Kiev by annexing Crimea, site of a major Russian naval base. This act had the overwhelming support of the local population of the peninsula, which until 1954 had been part of Russia for 200 years. [[3]](#footnote-3) The annexation was also extremely popular in Russia itself, something that undoubtedly played a role in the government's decision to take that action. But already in 2008 at a NATO-Russia summit in Bucharest, Putin had warned that if NATO were to expand further, Russia would no longer support Ukraine's territorial integrity. [[4]](#footnote-4)

At the same time, however, the annexation proved highly counterproductive to the international situation of the Russian state, which Putin was presumably trying to protect. For it provoked the West's economic sanctions, strengthened the unity and military capacity of NATO as an anti-Russian alliance, and ensured the hostility of the Ukrainian state, a neighbor with which Russia's shares a 2000-km-long, vulnerable border as well as deep historic, ethnic, and cultural ties.

The annexation of Crimea also encouraged opposition movements to the new government in Kiev among the traditionally pro-Russian, predominantly Russian-speaking populations of the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine. These saw the new government as hostile and illegitimate. The residents of these regions were frightened by the violence in Kiev, by the prominence of ultra-nationalists on the Maidan and of nationalists in the new government, and by the parliament's initial moves, though subsequently not adopted by the government, to deprive the Russian language of any official status. These regions had voted strongly for Yanukovich, who might have been a corrupt bastard, but he was "our bastard. "But there were also economic interests at play. Eastern Ukraine's industry is closely integrated with Russia's economy and would have been seriously hurt by the Association Agreement.

In most places, Kiev's quick repressive measures were able to quash these protests. The most shocking case occurred in Odessa on 2 May 2014, when fascist thugs, brought in from the outside, massacred 42 anti-Maidan protesters. [[5]](#footnote-5) But in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions, protesters occupied government buildings, copying actions taken only a few months before with impunity by anti-Yanukovich protesters in Ukraine's western regions. [[6]](#footnote-6) But the new government in Kiev almost immediately labelled these protesters as "terrorists" and, without making any serious efforts to reassure the local population, launched an "anti-terrorist operation," sending the army, reinforced by neo-fascist units that had been hastily incorporated into the National Guard.

In the ensuing months, a nationalist, anti-Russian wave, promoted by the government and by the "oligarch"- (big capital of criminal origin) controlled mass media, but also fed by popular indignation at Russia's annexation of Crimea, swept the country. Presidential and parliamentary elections in May and October 2014 produced a nationalist government committed to pursuing the "Anti-Terrorist Operation."

The war has officially taken more almost 7000 lives, wounded many more, and displaced over two million. It has also completely undermined Ukraine's already weak economy (most of its industry is located in the East, while Russia was Ukraine's biggest trading partner) and [85] depressed already low living standards. While Kiev and its NATO supporters insist that this is a case of Russian aggression, Moscow and the Donetsk-Lugansk insurgents call it a civil war, not forgetting to mention NATO's support for Kiev.

In fact, the conflict is a combination of both. Most of the fighters in Donetsk-Lugansk are local residents. But without the material and logistic support of Russia - the dimensions of direct intervention by Russian troops have been grotesquely exaggerated by Kiev - the insurgents would not have been able to hold out against Kiev. Despite NATO's claims, Moscow has no interest in annexing the Donbass or any other part of the former Soviet sphere of domination and it would be quite happy with a non-aligned status for Ukraine - something the present Ukrainian parliament has unanimously rejected. Moscow also seems sincere in its support for the Minsk-II accords of February 2015 that call for a cease-fire, amnesty, and a decentralizing constitutional reform, to be negotiated directly with the insurgents and which would offer their regions a special status, including linguistic self-determination. [[7]](#footnote-7)

For domestic reasons, Moscow cannot permit a defeat of the insurgents. That means that a military victory is excluded for Kiev. Putin's regime is undemocratic. It suffers from endemic corruption and its policies systematically favour the political and economic elites at the expense of the popular classes. But his own popularity is based on widespread patriotic sentiment that derives from a shared perception of NATO's aggressive policy towards Russia, as well as from the fear that chaos - not unlike what Ukraine is experiencing - would follow Putin's departure. Putin, of course, has made sure that no credible alternative to him emerges.

As for the non-combatant residents of Donetsk-Lugansk, who no doubt thirst above all for a return to peace, Kiev has treated them as belligerents from the beginning, thus guaranteeing their widespread, if not unanimous, sympathy for the insurgents. [[8]](#footnote-8) Kiev's troops have regularly bombarded civilian targets. It has blockaded the region, cutting supply lines, including water and medicines, and making travel very difficult. It has also closed the banking system and cancelled social benefit and pension payments. All this is in violation of the Minsk agreements, which call to restore all economic and social ties with the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics. [[9]](#footnote-9)

In sum, Kiev has made no effort to "win the hearts and minds" of a population that the Prime Minister Yatsenyuk once termed "subhuman". And President Poroshenko, even after conclusion of the Minsk accords, still periodically called for a military victory. This absence of a policy aimed at "winning hearts and minds" has puzzled observers sympathetic to Kiev. [[10]](#footnote-10) At the same time, the government adopts laws glorifying Ukrainian collaborators with Nazi Germany that seems calculated to alienate the residents of the contested regions and the large number of Ukrainians elsewhere who do not share the culture and ideological orientations of the nationalists.

In short, Kiev has not made any serious effort to win over the residents of the insurgent regions. And despite the Minsk accords, President Poroshenko continues periodically to speak of a military victory. This apparent lack of concern to "win hearts and minds" has puzzled observers who are sympathetic to Kiev. But the fact is that Kiev cannot recognize the domestic sources of the conflict. This is a regime that needs desperately to project, both internally and externally, the image of a country locked in a war of survival with a perfidious and voracious aggressor.

On one level, that is merely a continuation of the basic orientation of the Ukrainian political elites since independence in 1991. Rather than strive to unite a population that is [86] linguistically, culturally, ideologically, and economically divided, a population which inhabits a territory that prior to 1991 never constituted an independent political entity, these elites have manipulated and exacerbated the divisions in order to gain political and economic advantage over rivals and to divert popular attention from their corruption and tyranny. The "war of national defence against Russian aggression" has allowed that section of the elite that has promoted western Ukrainian, anti-Russian nationalism and identity significantly to expand its popular support beyond its core area in the west and in sections of Kiev society. (People from outside Ukraine are often surprised to learn that there are ethnic Ukrainians and Russians on both sides of the conflict.) But more importantly, it has allowed the "oligarch class" as a whole to divert popular attention from the anti-oligarch dimension of the Maidan movement and to limit popular protest against a disastrous economic situation and "austerity" policies that continue to impoverish the population. [[11]](#footnote-11) Recent surveys show a dramatic decline in popular support for the government [[12]](#footnote-12) that can only strengthen the latter's motivation to pursue the war, as it serves to justify the people's sacrifices and the suppression of protest as being anti-Ukrainian.

The war has also assured Western diplomatic, economic, and military support, though there are some signs of fatigue on that score. As for the NATO military alliance itself, it has been only too happy to buy into Kiev's version, since that has served to solidify its own ranks and to justify increased military spending among its members.

But apart from those interests, the ruling political coalition in Kiev would fly apart if the government were to undertake a serious peace effort with a view to reintegrating the rebellious region. Indeed, there are already signs of that happening, even though the recent decentralizing laws adopted by parliament seem more symbolic than real and do not correspond to the demands of the Minsk accords. The Ukrainian political elites have always been deeply fractious: principle and civic virtue are rare qualities. At the same time, cultural-ideological and "identity" differences, though inseparable from elite interest and manipulation, are real factors in their own right. How else, for example, could one explain government moves to cut economic links with Russia, even while Russia, despite the war, remains Ukraine's biggest trading partner? Or the glorification of Nazi collaborators who massacred tens of thousands of Poles during the war, even while the Polish government has been one of Kiev's strongest backers ?

Besides that, also for ideological reasons, but mainly because of the weak motivation of regular soldiers, Kiev has tolerated and armed neo-fascist military units and has formally integrated them into the military command. But the government's control of these forces, which are undoubtedly guilty of serious war crimes in the east and who keep illegally their arms after leaving active service, is at best tenuous. And neo-fascists have secured top positions within the security apparatus itself. [[13]](#footnote-13)

A recent manifesto of the neo-nazi Right Sector party declares that the Maidan revolution has failed and calls for carrying through the "national revolution" to the end. Yarosh, Member of Parliament and official advisor to the army's commander, has publicly declared his refusal to honour the Minsk accord. The Right Sector's press secretary has stated that in a new revolution, the President and his associates would not be allowed to flee, like Yanukovich, but would be executed in a dark basement. [[14]](#footnote-14)

While opinions vary on the strength of the fascist threat, it is without doubt a real factor in Ukrainian politics. At present, the neo-fascists do not have significant support in the [87] general population. But they are armed and organized and they know what they want. The popular classes, on the other hand, are atomized and politically disoriented. Neo-fascist influence could grow as the economic situation deteriorates and if political chaos engulfs the country in the event of serious moves by the President, under Western pressure, to negotiate seriously a settlement with the insurgent region.

Given the present weakness of the left in Ukraine, this is unfortunately a more likely scenario than the emergence of a progressive movement that could unite popular forces across the regions and cultures against the rule of the oligarchs. But however remote that latter perspective is at present, it is the only one that can in the long run prevent the further disintegration of the country.

October 2015

1. For the full text, see *The Guardian.* 22 February 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The most thorough research of this question has been conducted by I. Katchanovski. See his "The 'Snipers'Massacre' on the Maidan in Ukraine," 20 February 2015. <http://www.academia>. edu/8776021/The\_Snipers\_Massacre\_on\_the\_Maidan\_in\_Ukraine. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Various polls confirmed the popular support. See "Survey of Attitudes of the Crimea People to the Events of 2014" [http://newcoldwar.org/survey-on-attitudes-of-the-crimea-people-to-the-events-of-2014/](http://newcoldwar.org/survey-on-attitudes-of-the-crimea-peopleto-the-events-of-2014/); and "Pew Centre Poll April of 2014 - 91% of respondents in Crimea state referendum was free and fair" Pew Centres' Global Attitudes Project (2014) www. pewglobal,org/2014/05/08/chapter-1-ukraine-desure-for-unity-amid-worries-about-political-leadership-ethnic-conflict [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [http://www.unian.info/world/111033-text-of-putins-speech-at-nato-summit-bucharest-april-2-2008.html](http://www.unian.info/world/111033-text-of-putins-speech-at-nato-summit-bucharestapril-2-2008.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For the conclusions of an in-depth study by a Russian opposition newspaper, see Yu. Polukhin, "Kapkan dlya svoikh," *Novaya* gazeta, 2 July 2014, pp. 7-9. See also a summary of Katchanovksi's research on the massacre at [http://newcoldwar.org/a-new-analysis-of-the-massacre-events-in-odessa-ukraine-of-may-2-2014](http://newcoldwar.org/a-new-analysis-of-the-massacre-eventsin-odessa-ukraine-of-may-2-2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a report on the early stages of the protests in the east and a plea for understanding, see 0. Grytsenko, "What Drives the Hate in Eastern Ukraine," *KyivPost* April 16,2014. On the earlier anti-Yanoukovich uprisings in the western regions, see R. Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine, Crisis in the Borderlands,* London: I.B.Taurus, 2015, p. 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For the full text, see [http://www.unian.info/politics/1043394-minsk-agreement-full-text-in-english.html](http://www.unian.info/politics/1043394-minsk-agreement-full-text-inenglish.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, for example, the article from *The Financial Times,* a newspaper that is very sympathetic to Kiev: "School lessons and shelling forge new identity in east Ukraine," 14 February 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. "Kto sryvaet Miniskie soglashenia," *Novaya gazeta,* 22 May 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. "It is baffling, however, why the Ukrainian government has not sought to win over the easterners by trying to send them its own aid convoys, even if the rebels prevented them from crossing into their territory. To ordinary people in the east it looks like Kiev does not care much about them and considers them the enemy." (T. Judah, "Ukraine: Inside the Deadlock," *The New York Review of Books, 7* May 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The average monthly pension stands at US$ 72.5, and the number of Ukrainians in food poverty has increased six fold in the past two years. *Business News Europe,* 14 July 2015 ([www.bne.eu](http://www.bne.eu)). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. International Republican Institute, Public Opinion Survey Residents of Ukraine, 16-30 July 2015, <http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2015-08-24_survey_of_residents_of_ukraine_>july\_16-30\_2015.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. To cite just two examples, Vadim Troyan, deputy commander of the neo-nazi Azov Regiment and active member of the neo-nazi paramilitary organization Patriot of Ukraine (the paramilitary wing of the Social-Nationalist Assembly) is head of the Kiev police. (H. Coynash, "Disastrous Police Appointment," 7 November 2014, *Human Rights in Ukraine,* <http://khpg.org/en/index>. php?id=1415367345), and Dm. Yarosh, head of the neo-nazi party Right Sector is advisor to the Chief of General Staff of the army, Viktor Muzhenko. <http://www.mil.gov.ua/en/>news/2015/04/05/dmytro-yarosh-appointed-as-advisor-to-chief-of-general-staff/ [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. [http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/ukraine-droht-neuer-konflikt-diesmal-an-der-westgrenze-a-1043616.html](http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/ukraine-droht-neuer-konflikt-diesmal-an-derwestgrenze-a-1043616.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)