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“Ukraine Crisis”: a view from Kyiv

// Evropský filozofický a historický diskurz

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The author, a Ukrainian historian and a witness of the late 2013-early 2014 events in Kyiv, presents her view on a complex phenomenon, called “Ukraine crisis”. The paper explains the causes of the crisis, and some ambivalent issues, related to Maidan and post-Maidan periods. It briefly analyzes both domestic and international dimensions of the crisis, and emphasizes Russia’s role in it. The author argues that Russia’s aggression against Ukraine caused “Russia” international crisis, which did not let domestic “Ukraine” crisis to finish, but deepened and expanded it. “Russia crisis” has revealed fundamental shifts in the international strategic environment in the early 21st century. Its outcome will determine the rules in world politics, and the fundamental features of the international order.

Key words: Ukraine crisis, Russia crisis, Ukrainian Revolution, Russia’s aggression

So called “Ukraine crisis” is a complex phenomenon, which is not easy to categorize and chronologize. It includes many dimensions, both Ukrainian domestic and international, bilateral and multilateral, European and global.

Since late 2013-early 2014 a lot of analytical reports and scientific works, including books have been written to describe this phenomenon. So far, the most comprehensive study of the subject is presented by Andrew Wilson¹, Serhy Yakelchuk², Taras Kyzio¹, Andreas Aslund², and Richard Sakva’s³ books,

¹ Wilson, Andrew (2014). *Ukraine Crisis. What it Means for the West*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

² Yakelchuk, Serhy (2015). *The Conflict in Ukraine. What Everyone Needs to Know*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Alexander Motyl's papers, as well as by some collective monographs, published in the U.S. and the E.U.⁴ In spite of the authors claim to present an unbiased view on the crisis, their narratives about 2013-2016 events in Ukraine essentially depend on their personal political views, and their attitude to Ukraine and Russia. For example, Richard Sakwa's "unbiased" description of the same events differ significantly from Andrew Wilsons' one. In the amount of scientific literature about "Ukraine crisis", Ukrainian narrative and analysis are hardly observed. This paper presents this phenomenon from a point of view of a Ukrainian historian from Kyiv, and a witness of the events.

Difficulties in writing about the crisis start with a definition of its name. Ukrainian scholars oppose the term "Ukraine crisis" as, in their opinion, it emphasizes ills of Ukraine that presumably have caused the crisis. However, we agree with American and European scholars who define the crisis as "Ukraine", "Ukraine's" or "Ukrainian". We also argue that since Russia's aggression against Ukraine the term "Russia international crisis" also applies. Nevertheless, it cannot replace previous term completely, because "Russia crisis" did not let domestic "Ukraine" crisis to finish, but deepened and expanded it.

In the domestic realm the term "Ukraine crisis" literally applies to the events between November 2013 and February 2014, a period of mass anti-government

¹ Kuzio, Taras (2015). *Ukraine. Democratization, Corruption, and the new Russian Imperializm*. Santa Barbara, California: Praeger Security International.

² Aslund, Anders (2015). *Ukraine. What Went Wrong and How to Fix It*. Washington D.C.: Peterson Institute for International Economics.

³ Sakwa, Richard (2015). *Frontline Ukraine. Crisis in the Borderlands*. London: Tauri.

⁴ Menon, Rajan and Eugene Rumer (2015). *Conflict in Ukraine. The Unwinding of the Post-Cold War Order*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: A Boston Review Book; London, England: The MIT Press; Wood, Elizabeth A., William E.Pomeranz, E. Wayne Merry, and Maxim Trudolyubov (2016). *Roots of Russia's War in Ukraine*. Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

protests in Ukraine that started in Kyiv as a reaction to the President Yanukovich's decision to postpone the signature of the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement. The protests revealed people's vision of Ukraine as a part of Europe, their eagerness to fundamental reforms and deep discontent with the Yanukovich regime. We consider the events, also known as Euromaidan, as the next stage of the 2004 Orange Revolution, which did not reach its goals. At the beginning, the developments were similar, but after forceful dispersal of a students' camp at Maidan a part of protestors (called activists) took more radical stance, and finally shifted from peaceful to violent actions to make the President Yanukovich go. The actions revealed that a part of Ukrainian society has become more radical, less tolerant to dishonest politicians, and more inclined to drastic measures for last ten years.

Yanukovich's personality contributed a lot to the events. The negative perception of the President with criminal past and the same criminal methods in power united different social, political and business groups against him. However, the activists went further than the political opposition leaders. They believed that it was not only the President who had to be replaced, but the whole ineffective and corruptive governmental system. Unlike 2004, no one of the politicians was fully trusted by the protestors. Maidan presented a new kind of protests, "horizontal", rather than top-down, and truly social¹. It was self-organized and self-governed; it produced new leaders, new methods of activity, and new culture.

Maidan's roots go deeply into Ukrainian Cossack ancestry. 16-18th centuries Cossacks considered liberty their most valuable asset, and they were ready to die for it. The text of Ukrainian national anthem includes the words: "We will lay our soul and body for our freedom, and we will prove that we are Cossacks' descendants". That is what happened at Maidan. It was not just an uprising or a riot. The events were rightly coined as a Revolution of Dignity as they revealed

¹ Karpyak, Oleg (2014). Ukraine's Two Different Revolutions. *BBC*. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25210230>> (2016, April, 5)

people's aspirations for a decent life, effective liberal and social state, European developmental model, and fundamental reforms that the nation desperately needed.

Kyiv Maidan created a model for similar "Maidans" in different parts of Ukraine, mostly in its western and central parts. At the same time, "anti-Maidans" in other parts of Ukraine, especially eastern and southern ones, also appeared. There were two principal issues that divided Ukrainian society, specifically an attitude to a ruling Party of Regions, and to relations with Russia, which initiated a new ambitious integration project – Eurasian Economic Union – within post-Soviet area. The protests revealed that the discontent with the president Yanukovich's rule and aspiration for Ukraine to be a part of united Europe were not shared in all parts of the country equally. Different approaches to the issues were known long before the revolution, as voters demonstrated their political preferences during parliamentary and presidential elections. It was Russia's aggressive interference that turned the disagreements into a violent separatism.

From the very beginning, Russia's propaganda created a myth about Nazi coup in Kyiv that removed the legitimate President from power. The myths targeted not only Russian and foreign audiences, but also Ukrainian citizens. They generated a feeling of threat in mostly Russian-speaking parts of Ukraine from alleged "Banderivtsy" (Stepan Bandera's supporters), though most of people did not actually know who they were. For some people, S. Bandera's name was associated with anti-Soviet military force in the Western Ukraine during the World War II and in the aftermath or with his cooperation with German Nazi. For others, it was just a symbol of increasing influence of Ukrainians from Western regions on politics in Kyiv. Undoubtedly, S. Bandera is an ambiguous figure in Ukrainian history. However, his actions do not look as much odious, if to put them into a historical context, and recall Stalin's USSR and Hitler's Germany "friendship" during first years of the World War II (September 1939 – June 1941), their shared expansionist ideology and practice, and millions of lives, taken by the Stalin's regime in 1930s, including millions of Ukrainians, who died because of repressions and famine.

Any unbiased observation of events in Kyiv in February 2014 leads to a conclusion that they did not relate to Nazi coup in any way. As for S. Bandera, for Maidan-supporters his name was associated with self-sacrifice in the name of Ukraine and its liberation from Soviet, Nazi German and Polish rule, considered by S. Bandera and his supporters as an occupation. There were a lot of intellectuals and students (neither Nazi no extremists) at Maidan during its both peaceful and violent stages. The results of 2014 presidential and parliamentary elections demonstrated Ukrainians' moderate political preferences. The most radical nationalist party "Svoboda" (Liberty) (still neither Nazi no extremist), a leading political organization in the struggle against V. Yanukovich regime, did not overcome 5% vote barrier to be elected to the parliament¹.

As for a removal of a "legitimate" president by illegal methods, not all but fair elections form legitimate power. They require equal opportunities for all candidates and political parties, and no use of administrative resources. In Ukraine, these factors were absent. Most businesses were subordinated to the V. Yanykovich's "family". The President's Party of Regions encountered more than 1,3 million members in 2013, and controlled all levels of power. In this regard it resembled the Communist Party of the Soviet Union². The Administration's illegal methods made any legal ones to change it predetermined to failure. There was no other way to remove V. Yanukovich from power than people's uprising.

Then, V. Yanukovich was not removed from power illegally. He and the members of his "family" fled the country to Russia after he signed a compromise agreement with the moderate opposition leaders about early presidential and

¹ Extraordinary Parliamentary Elections 2014. *Central Election Commission*. <http://www.cvk.gov.ua/vnd_2014/> (2016, March, 5); Ukraine. *The World Factbook*. <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/up.html>> (2016, March, 5)

² Украинская КПСС. Массовость и конъюнктурность превращают Партию регионов в КПСС (2013). *Korrespondent*. <<http://korrespondent.net/ukraine/politics/1517259-korrespondent-ukrainskaya-kpss-massovost-i-konyunktturnost-prevrashchayut-partiyu-regionov-v-kpss>> (2016, April, 6)

parliamentary elections¹. The agreement, reached through the international mediation, was designed to end a severe political crisis in Ukraine. However, Yanukovych decided to flee the country that demonstrated his understanding of inevitable responsibility for the illegal activity. After the President stopped exercising his duties, a legitimate parliament appointed the Acting President and a new government until the early presidential elections in May 2014 and parliamentary elections in October 2014. It was expected that they would end the political crisis in Ukraine. That did not happen because of Russia's aggression, which gave the "Ukraine crisis" a completely different meaning.

In the domestic realm a revolution in Ukraine has continued, as revolutions do not stop with shifts in power, but require drastic changes. Maidan has just launched the process of fundamental reforms to make Ukraine a stronger and more effective liberal, democratic, and social state. The overwhelming majority of Ukrainians stands for a rule of law, liberal democracy, responsible government, productive economy and a social state, for the values and models, represented by the European nations and the U.S. It contests corruption, ineffective government and criminal schemes. Most of Ukrainians also stand for their country real sovereignty and their right to choice its future.

So far, the changes are rather slow and have not passed a point of no return yet. However, it is much more difficult to implement fundamental reforms in a democratic state than in an authoritarian one, especially in times of a prolonged crisis. Additionally, Ukraine has started comprehensive reforms only during the third decade of its independence, which is another key obstacle to their rapid implementation. Ukrainian governments lost the best time for reforms in early 1990s because their agenda was always dominated by security issues. Though the term "Russia's threat" was never used, policymakers had to consider Kremlin's reaction on their decisions, including rapprochement with the E.U.

¹ Соглашение между Януковичем и оппозицией – полный текст. *Наша Ніва.nn.by*. <<http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=123175&lang=ru>> (2016, April, 5)

Since early 21st century, Russian government has demonstrated its interest in establishing the similar authoritarian regime in Ukraine, and reintegration of post-Soviet area. However, Ukrainians are not Russians. Every attempt to implement the vision caused massive opposition, including 2004 and 2013-2014 Maidans. At the same time, Maidans' participants did not understand Russia's threat and largely ignored the issue that finally led to tragic consequences. As further events revealed, nobody foresaw Russia's aggression, even leading Western experts.

Ukraine's rapprochements with the EU and its course of fundamental reforms have been considered in Moscow as a sharp move from Russia, which suggests Ukraine a vital sphere of its influence. Moreover, Ukraine is a key element of Russia's Slavic and European identity. Ukraine occupies the major territory of the medieval Slavic state (namely Rus land with a capital in Kyiv) that Russia claims to ascend from. That is why it is known as Kyiv Rus (not Kyiv Russia, as it is often mistakenly translated). Moscow Principality (Moscovia) was only one of many Rus' principalities, and it took the name "Russia" only after establishing its control over Kyiv. It is Ukraine that is a heart of Rus' land, so the name "Russia" more applies to contemporary Ukraine than Russia. The identity crisis in Russia after Soviet Union disintegration has caused its return to imperialist policy to possess Ukraine again, though in a different form.

After the opposition's victory in Kyiv in late February 2014, Russia has started a fierce anti-Ukrainian propaganda and launched special operations to destabilize situation in the regions with predominantly Russian-speaking population. The actions caused antigovernment unrests in different parts of Ukraine, mostly in the Crimean Autonomous Republic and Donbass region. Crimean crisis, orchestrated from Moscow, ended very quickly by Russia's occupation and annexation of peninsular.

The occupation and annexation of Crimea present the most apparent acts of Russia's aggression, a gross violation of international norms and rules. By the actions, Russia disregarded bilateral and multilateral agreements with Ukraine, including the 1994 Budapest memorandum on security assurances in connection

with Ukraine's accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons¹, the 1997 Ukraine-Russia "Grand" Treaty on friendship, cooperation and partnership² and the 2003 bilateral Treaty on Ukraine-Russia state border³. There were two main reasons, why Kyiv government did not act more decidedly during Crimean crisis to stop separatists, including using security forces. First of all, it tried to avoid Russia's military interference, taking into consideration its military base at Crimea and concentration of its troops on Ukraine's borders. Then, it did not expect Russia's disregard of international agreements and norms, and relied heavily on international support to preserve its territorial integrity.

When the previous tactics of securing Ukraine's integrity did not work, Ukrainian government has launched an Anti-terrorist Operation against separatists at Donbass, who were inspired by Crimea secession. As Russia provided them with a financial, military and manpower support, the operation escalated into a full-scale military conflict. Russia's propaganda pictures it as a civil war in Ukraine, and V. Putin presents himself a peacemaker. However, without Russia's management, financial and military supplies, political and diplomatic support of the separatists and without annexation of Crimea would not be any military conflict at Donbass at all.

In fact, Russia is waging a proxy war against Ukraine at Donbass. When the Anti-terrorist Operation was going to succeed in August 2014, Russia used its regular military forces to unblock such developments. Ukraine suffered great losses

¹ Ukraine. Memorandum on Security Assurances. Budapest, 5 December 1994. *Wikisource*. <https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ukraine._Memorandum_on_Security_Assurance> (2016, April, 5)

² The Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. May 31, 1997. *CIS-Legislation.com*. <<http://cis-legislation.com/document.fwx?rgn=4181>> (2016, April, 5); Договір про дружбу, співробітництво і партнерство між Україною і Російською Федерацією. *Верховна рада України*. <: http://zakon4.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/643_006> (2016, April, 6)

³ Договір між Україною і Російською Федерацією про українсько-російський державний кордон (28.01.2004). *Верховна рада України*. <Access mode: http://zakon4.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/643_157> (2016, April, 6)

and had to sign Minsk agreement in September 2014. Russia's-managed separatists did not obey the rules and used armistice on their advantage. With Russia's support, they organized a large offensive in early 2015 that forced Ukrainian government to sign Minsk-2 agreement, which was Ukraine's diplomatic defeat. Its implementation completely depends on Russia's good will. However, Kremlin is not interested in finishing the conflict to have leverage over Ukraine.

Besides a proxy war at Donbass, Russia has been waging a non-proclaimed "hybrid" war against Ukraine that includes ideological, information, trade, and gas wars, and special agents' subversive activities to destabilize situation in Ukraine. Russia's aggression threatens existing of Ukraine as a national state, and indeed, its disintegration and destruction is Kremlin's ultimate goal. It was 2008, several year before the Revolution of Dignity, when V. Putin told to G. W. Bush that "Ukraine was not a state", "while the western part of the country may belong to Eastern Europe, Eastern part is Russia's"¹. As long as the resources in Russian-Ukrainian undeclared war are clearly asymmetrical, it is only international support that enables Ukraine to survive and continue the struggle.

Russian state machine is very skillful in producing false ideological constructions and myths to justify its aggressive expansionist policy. Kremlin explains its policy towards Ukraine by its obligations to protect ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking population, including their language rights. In fact, the language problem has never been a major issue in Ukraine, but a tool to ruin it from inside. Ukraine as a national state cannot exist without a national identity, including national culture and language. That is why Ukrainian language is official in Ukraine, and it has to be protected because of its long-termed discrimination.

Politicization of Russian language problem, along with Russian Orthodox Church and Russian TV, has been a powerful tool of Russia's "soft power" in Ukraine. However, overwhelming majority of ethnic Russian and Russian-

¹ Morelly, Vincent L. (2016) Ukraine: Current Issues and U.S. Policy. *Congressional Research Service*. <Access mode: <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33460.pdf>> (2016, April, 5)

speaking Ukrainians identifies themselves with Ukraine, not Russia. They constitute Ukrainian political nation, and they contribute to Ukrainian revolution as much as other Ukrainian citizens. Russia's interference to "protect" them has a visible opposite effect. According to the UN report on Human Rights, presented in Kyiv in June 2016, as a result of military conflict at Donbass, at least 9 371 people were killed, 21 523 were wounded, a lot of people had been missing¹. About 1,5 million people were forced to migrate, and experienced severe financial and moral hardships.

Russia's claims to protect ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking population are correlated with "Russian World" concept, which is not brand new. In the 19-early 20th centuries Russian Empire used the similar concept of panslavism, and claimed a protection of Slavs and Orthodox Christians to ruin Ottoman Empire and Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy. Aggressively nationalist, expansionist and imperialist Russia's policy has not changed, but in the 21st its main target has been Ukraine.

Human concerns were never a driving force of Russia's policy. It has been all about strengthening of Russian state by any means, without any humanitarian component. Throughout all its history Russia/Soviet Union/Russian Empire repeatedly created international crises on near abroad for further expansion. So called "Ukraine crisis" is one of them. However, it is not just a war for territories and strategic advantages; it is a struggle of different developmental models – Russia's authoritarian and Ukraine's democratic. Moreover, Ukraine's success could inspire other post-Soviet nations to keep more independent position in regard to Moscow, or encourage domestic transformations in Russia that Kremlin cannot tolerate.

Russia's aggression against Georgia (2008) and Ukraine has revealed its new revisionist stance on international arena. V. Putin has sent a strong message

¹ В ООН озвучили свіжі дані про кількість вбитих та поранених за час війни на Донбасі. 3 червня 2016 р. *Tyzhden.ua* < <http://tyzhden.ua/News/166667>> (2016, April, 5)

“Russia is back” to bargain other great power’s recognition of Russia spheres of influence in the post-Soviet area and above, and new rules in world politics. Since Russia’s aggression, the “Ukraine” crisis has turned into “Russia” international crisis, because it relates not only to Ukraine. Kremlin’s goals embrace a return to status-quo in Europe before the Soviet Union’s collapse, including the EU disintegration. Besides Ukraine, the “Russia crisis” includes a crisis of European and global security institutions, and great powers’ relations. It reveals helplessness of middle and small nations in face of a great power with aggressive nationalist ideology, nuclear weapons and a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. It also reveals helplessness of great powers in face of cynic ignorance of international norms by other great power if they do not serve its interests.

The crisis has demonstrated that the Cold War mentality is still alive. Nowadays Russia’s rhetoric largely resembles the Soviet one. Its official media is blowing up an image of Russia as a besieged fortress, explains the annexation of Crimea by a desire to avoid a potential allocation of NATO base at the peninsular. If Cold War is defined as primarily ideological confrontation between nations with different models of development, nowadays we are witnessing the battle of values again, presented by the Ukrainian revolution and Russia’s intervention. Simultaneously, the “Russia crisis” has showed that the issues of traditional security are relevant again. Today, as during Cold War period, NATO and Russia consider each other as strategic rivals.

Also, the crisis has revealed fundamental shifts in the international strategic environment in the early 21st century. For a short historical period, the international system underwent significant transformations from a bipolar to unipolar, and then to multipolar world order. The U.S. and European nations do not have a dominant position in the global affairs as they used to. Power is distributed between new centers, state and non-state entities. There is no global leader acceptable for all centers of power. This particular strategic environment has enabled Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its further aggression against Ukraine. “Russia crisis” is an evidence of multilateral world order fragility, when a great power acts

irresponsibly in the name of its own selfish interests. The 2008 war against Georgia was a trial balloon of a new Russia's foreign policy. The U.S. and Europe's weak response on the aggression encouraged Moscow to continue.

Growing interdependence of nations in a globalized world makes it more difficult to stop aggressor, especially as it is one of the great nations with nuclear weapons and a permanent seat in the UN Security Council with the veto power. European and American policymakers deny that the crisis started a new Cold War in the international relations, as far as there are a lot of regional and global issues where great powers, including Russia, have to work together. However, in spite of a crucial importance of international cooperation to address the issues of the mutual concern, aggression must not be tolerated. History says that concessions never made aggressors stop; they only encouraged their further expansion and made the situation much worse.

Europe and world need both a strong reliable Ukraine and Russia. However, Russia cannot be a reliable partner until it pursues aggressive policy. Russian Empire, as well as the Soviet Union, caused a lot of problems for different states and international relations in general, including the first and the second world wars. Extremely nationalist imperial nuclear Russia that cynically violates international norms and rules is even more dangerous, especially in the new multilateral and globalized international environment.

In conclusion, "Ukraine crisis" is viewed differently from Kyiv, Moscow, and other places. It is hard to generate a completely unbiased approach to it, while it is still in process. A scientific discourse on the issue helps to debunk Russia's propaganda myths, and raises a lot of important theoretical questions: what is revolution, what is the difference between separatism and nations' right on self-determination, in what circumstances foreign intervention can be tolerated, and others.

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