

The Return of the Empire: The Ukraine Crisis in the Historical Perspective

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MARCH 18, 2014, WAS A DAY OF TRIUMPH for President Vladimir Putin, who was then serving his third term in that office. In the speech he delivered that day in the tsarist-era St. George's Hall of the Kremlin, a venue for meeting foreign delegations and holding the most solemn ceremonies of state, the Russian president asked the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, whose members were gathered in the hall, to pass a law annexing the Crimea. The reaction of the audience, which greeted the speech more than once with explosive applause, left no doubt that the law would be passed without delay. Only three days later, the Federal Assembly declared the Crimea to be part of Russia.

In his speech, Vladimir Putin hailed the annexation of the Crimea—an act undertaken in violation of the sovereignty of Ukraine, which had been guaranteed by Russo-Ukrainian treaties and ensured by the Budapest Memorandum of 1994—as a triumph of historical justice. Much of Putin's argument was historical and cultural in nature. Putin, who has never concealed his regret and even bitterness about the fall of the Soviet Union, referred specifically to the Soviet collapse in a speech delivered on the occasion of the Russian annexation of the Crimea in March 2014. “The Soviet Union fell apart. Things developed so swiftly that few people realized how truly dramatic those events and their consequences would be,” said Putin, recalling the events of 1991. “It was only when the Crimea ended up as part of a different country that Russia realized that it had not only been robbed but plundered.” He continued: “And what about the Russian state? What about Russia? It humbly accepted the situation. This country was going through such hard times then that, realistically, it was incapable of defending its interests.” Putin's speech was meant to remove all doubt that the “hard times” were over and that Russia was back, prepared to undo the “injustice” inflicted on it by the disintegration of the USSR.¹

What exactly that would mean, and how far Russia was prepared to go in order to undo perceived injustice, were the questions on the minds of many world leaders. After a telephone conversation with Putin, Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany said in apparent disbelief that

he was living “in another world.” The former American president, Bill Clinton, provided clarification of what world that was, suggesting that Putin wanted to re-establish Russian greatness in nineteenth-century terms. Prime Minister Arsenii Yatseniuk of Ukraine repeatedly accused Putin of wanting to restore the Soviet Union. The Russian president denied the charges, stating that he was not trying to bring back either the empire or the USSR. Technically, he was right. During the past decade, Russia has been waging open and hybrid wars, annexing territories, and using its virtual monopoly on energy supplies to the countries of Eastern Europe as a weapon, the object being to establish a much less costly and more flexible system of political control over post-Soviet space than was available either to the Russian Empire or to the Soviet Union. Yet many policies of the present-day Russian leadership have their origins in the last years and months of the existence of the USSR.²

By far the most important of those policies has been the Russian leadership’s early decision to maintain Moscow’s political, economic, and military control over the “near abroad,” as the Russian political elite and media dubbed the former Soviet republics. As early as the fall of 1991, advisers to Boris Yeltsin envisioned Russia gathering in the republics on its borders within the subsequent twenty years. Like many other former imperial powers, Russia opted out of the empire because it lacked the resources to keep the costly imperial project going. Unlike most of its counterparts, however, it took along the rich oil and gas resources of the empire—most of the Soviet oil and gas reserves were located in Russian Siberia. Thus Russia had more to gain economically than to lose from the collapse of the USSR. Russian control over oil and gas resources made the divorce with the empire in 1991 easier in economic terms and prevented armed conflict between Russia and the republics that declared independence. We now know that such conflict was not eliminated but merely postponed. Over the last decade, rising oil and gas prices have made it possible for Russia to rebuild its economic potential and military might, allowing it to reopen the question of disputed borders and territories, and step up its efforts to gather back the Soviet republics more than twenty years after the Soviet collapse.

Ukraine, the second-largest post-Soviet republic, has played a crucial role in preventing successive Russian attempts to reintegrate the “near abroad” in economic, military, and political terms. Back in 1991, Russo-Ukrainian relations were the key factor in deciding the future of the Soviet Union. In August 1991, once the Ukrainian parliament declared the republic’s independence, the Russian government of Boris Yeltsin threatened Kyiv with partitioning of its territory. Fingers were pointed

specifically at the Crimea and the Donbas, which became a battleground twenty-three years later. Despite threats from Moscow, Ukraine pushed forward with its quest for independence, and in December 1991 the Soviet Union was replaced by the Commonwealth of Independent States, which was the result of a Russo-Ukrainian compromise. In his speech on the annexation of the Crimea, Putin claimed that many in Russia regarded the Commonwealth as a new form of statehood. But that was not the position of the Ukrainian leadership, which took its own independence and that of the other Soviet republics with the utmost seriousness.³

In the 1990s, Ukraine turned the Commonwealth into an instrument for a “civilized divorce”—a term coined in Kyiv—as opposed to one for Russian control over the “near abroad.” Ukraine worked hard to ensure recognition of its borders by Russia. In 1994, Kyiv gave up its nuclear arsenal in exchange for a guarantee of territorial integrity and independence given by Russia, the United States, and Great Britain. In 1997, the Ukrainian government agreed to lease the naval base in Sevastopol to the Russian fleet in exchange for a treaty that recognized the inviolability of Ukrainian borders. It took the Russian parliament two years to ratify the treaty that formally recognized the Crimea and Sevastopol as integral parts of Ukrainian territory. It seemed that the two countries had finally resolved all outstanding issues in their relations resulting from the Soviet collapse.⁴

The next decade demonstrated the limits of the Russo-Ukrainian understanding and the degree to which Russia was prepared to recognize Ukraine as an independent state. In the late 1990s, Ukraine began its drift toward the West, declaring integration into the European Union as the goal of its foreign policy and refusing to join Russia-led economic, military, and political institutions. Domestically, Ukraine managed to remain a much more pluralistic society than Russia, with a strong parliament, competitive politics, and an influential opposition. In 2004, Ukrainian civil society refused to accept the results of a rigged election and endorse the Russian-backed candidate, Viktor Yanukovich, as the country’s new president. After a long and peaceful protest that became known as the Orange Revolution, the outgoing president of Ukraine agreed to a new round of elections that brought to power a pro-Western candidate, Viktor Yushchenko. From that time on, Moscow treated Kyiv’s orientation on the West not only as a growing external danger but also as a threat to its own increasingly authoritarian regime. As far as the Kremlin was concerned, Ukraine’s rejection of rigged elections and resistance to a corrupt regime was setting an example to Russia’s own struggling civil society and had to be stopped at all costs.⁵

The current crisis in Russo-Ukrainian relations began on the night of November 21, 2013, with a Facebook post by a Ukrainian journalist of Afghan descent, Mustafa Nayem. He was disturbed by news that the government of Viktor Yanukovich, who had come to power in 2010, had refused to sign a long-awaited association agreement with the European Union, which envisioned the creation of a free economic zone including Ukraine and EU, and stipulated bringing the Ukrainian legislation, democratic procedures and business practices in line with those of the European Union. “Fine,” wrote Nayem in his Facebook account, “Let’s be serious. Who is ready to show up on the Maidan by midnight tonight? “Likes” will be ignored. Only comments on this post with the words ‘I’m ready.’” There were six hundred “I’m ready” responses. At 9:30 p.m., Nayem typed another post: “Dress warmly, bring umbrellas, tea, coffee, a good mood, and friends.” Shortly after 10:00 p.m., he was on Kyiv’s central square, known in Ukrainian as the Maidan, where the Orange Revolution had begun ten years earlier. About thirty people had gathered by the time he arrived. By midnight, there were more than a thousand young, educated urbanites. For them, the expected association agreement with the EU was the last hope that Ukraine might finally embark on a European course of development, overcome corruption, modernize its economy, and provide a decent standard of living for its people. Now, those hopes were being crushed. Nayem and his friends could not remain silent.⁶

The protest began like a festival, with singing and dancing to brave the cold weather of late November. It soon became known as the Euromaidan—the largest pro-European rally in history. President Yanukovich, for his part, had learned from the Orange Revolution of 2004 that the sooner one got rid of protesters, the better. Thus, in the early hours of November 30, riot police were ordered to attack the students camping on the Maidan. They did so with the utmost brutality under the pretext of clearing the square to allow the construction of a huge Christmas tree in preparation for New Year celebrations that were still one month away. Once images of police beating unarmed students were posted on the Internet, dormant Ukrainian civil society reacted sharply. The next day was Sunday, and more than half a million people showed up in downtown Kyiv to protest police brutality. The Euromaidan, which had begun with protests against the postponement of the signing of the EU association agreement, turned into what became known as the Revolution of Dignity. Hundreds of thousands of people would join the protests that continued through December 2013 into January and February 2014.

With the United States and EU countries applying pressure on President Yanukovych for a peaceful resolution of the crisis, Yanukovych turned to Russia. Ever since his election in 2010, the Kremlin had wanted him to stop Ukraine's drift toward the West, refuse to sign the association agreement with the EU, and join the Russia-led customs union whose members included Belarus and Kazakhstan. Yanukovych was at first reluctant to do so, but the Kremlin raised the stakes by starting a trade war with Ukraine in the summer of 2013. In November, Yanukovych gave up. He refused to sign the agreement with the EU and went to Russia instead to negotiate a U.S. \$15 billion loan needed to keep his kleptocratic government afloat until the next presidential elections, which were scheduled for 2015. The Russian government granted the loan and delivered the first instalment. The task now was to keep Yanukovych in power, and the Kremlin thought it could best be done by suppressing the Maidan protests—an option advocated publicly by Putin's adviser Sergei Glazev. In January 2014, as protests continued, Yanukovych forced laws through parliament allowing him to do just that. But the new laws, condemned by the opposition as draconian, only brought more people onto the streets.

Clashes between protesters and police began in late January, reaching their peak on February 18, 2014, when dozens of protesters and policemen were killed by gunfire. That day the government ordered snipers to shoot at the protesters, and fatalities among them soon exceeded one hundred. Those killed by the police and hired thugs became known as the "heavenly hundred." The European Union imposed sanctions, including travel bans and asset freezes, on members of the Ukrainian government responsible for the use of force against the protesters. The Ukrainian parliament, dominated by big-business oligarchs who did not want to lose access to money stashed in Western banks, passed a resolution prohibiting the government from using force against citizens. That was the end of the Yanukovych regime, which could not survive without reliance on brute force. On February 21, 2014, EU delegates led by the Polish minister of foreign affairs, Radosław Sikorski, negotiated a deal between Yanukovych and the leaders of the opposition. One of its conditions was a new presidential election before the end of the year. But Yanukovych, who had no illusions about its outcome, fled his mansion near Kyiv the same night, taking reportedly hundreds of millions of dollars and leaving behind a private zoo and a fleet of vintage cars. The next day parliament voted to remove him from office. He drove with his bodyguards to the Crimea, and then, by some accounts, boarded a Russian ship to make his way to the Russian Federation, where he was granted citizenship.⁷

The Russian government was extremely displeased with the turn of events in Kyiv. On February 21, 2014, the Russian representative at the negotiations conducted by Sikorski refused to sign the agreement on behalf of his state, but after Yanukovych fled Kyiv, Moscow accused the West and the Ukrainian opposition of not honoring the agreement. It declared the Kyiv events a coup and branded the new Ukrainian government unconstitutional. As the world watched the closing ceremonies of the Sochi winter Olympic Games on February 23, 2014, the corridors of European foreign ministries were rife with speculation about what Russia might do once the games were over. Vladimir Putin later admitted that on that day he gave his subordinates an order to begin the takeover of the Crimea. On February 27, four days after the end of the Olympics, Viktor Yanukovych, now safe on Russian territory, issued a statement claiming to be the legitimate president of Ukraine, and a detachment of heavily armed men in unmarked uniforms—seized the buildings of the Supreme Council and government of the Crimea and flew Russian flags atop both centers of power.

On the same day, with the “green men” firmly in control, the Crimean parliament held a closed session that lacked a quorum, according to numerous reports, and dissolved the Crimean government. As the new prime minister, it appointed Sergei Aksenov, the leader of the Russian Unity Party, which had obtained only 4% of the vote in the Crimean parliamentary elections. On March 1, Aksenov appealed to Vladimir Putin to help ensure “peace and order” on the peninsula. The next day, Russian military units moved out of their barracks in Sevastopol and, with the support of troops brought from Russia, seized control of the Crimea. They were assisted by specially trained groups of Russian Cossacks and mercenaries from Russia, as well as local militias. Vladimir Putin and the members of his government, who had originally denied allegations of Russian military intervention in the Crimea, eventually admitted the participation of the Russian military in its takeover.

The Russian annexation of the Crimea was given a veneer of legitimacy by a referendum hastily organized on March 16, 2014. Officials declared that more than 83% of eligible voters had taken part in the referendum, with close to 97% voting in favor of joining Russia. Unofficial reports, including those from the Human Rights Council subordinate to the Russian president, cut both numbers almost in half, estimating the turnout at under 40% and the vote for joining Russia at under 60%. Those figures find support in a poll conducted in the Crimea in February 2014, when not many more than 40% of those polled were in favor of joining Russia. But the new authorities clearly did not want to take any risks and

went for outright falsification. In the city of Sevastopol, they reported a turnout that amounted to 123% of registered voters. The referendum was boycotted by the 250,000-strong Crimean Tatar community and declared illegal by the government of Ukraine. Its results were not recognized by the international community. But on March 18, 2014, Russia officially annexed the peninsula. In his speech on the occasion, Vladimir Putin claimed that the Crimean referendum had been held “in full compliance with democratic procedures and international norms.”⁸

It turned out that the annexation of the Crimea was just the beginning of Russian aggression against Ukraine. In April, veterans of the Crimean campaign from the ranks of the Russian Cossacks, nationalist activists, and undercover intelligence officers moved from the Crimea to the cities and towns of southern and eastern Ukraine. Their targets were government administration buildings, as well as headquarters of police and security services in the cities of Kharkiv, Luhansk, Donetsk, Mykolaiv, and Odesa, as well as in the smaller towns of southeastern Ukraine. The goal, many believe, was to proclaim a number of separatist republics that would then unite as one Russia-backed state of Novorossia, or New Russia—the name originally used for one of the imperial provinces in southern Ukraine after the Russian annexation of the Crimea in the late eighteenth century. Participants in anti-government rallies were often bussed across the border from Russia and the Russian-controlled Transnistria region of Moldova.

The new revolutionary government in Kyiv was completely unprepared to deal with the Russian annexation of the Crimea and the hybrid war that the Kremlin had begun in the eastern Ukrainian Donbas (Donets Basin). For months, the leaders of the new government had led the opposition in its street war against the police and now could not rely on its support in dealing with the foreign-inspired insurgency. In fact, many policemen joined the Russian mercenaries and the local rebels. The Ukrainian army was virtually non-existent. It was in transition from a conscript army to a professional one, severely underfunded, with no combat experience. The Russians had been fighting their war in Chechnya since 1991, and the Ukrainians were no match for the well-trained Russian regular troops and Special Forces. It soon turned out they had major problems in dealing even with Russian-trained local militias. The troops originally could not bring themselves to shoot at paramilitaries who were firing on them and taking over their barracks and equipment.

Kyiv began to put its act together only in mid-April. It was then that one of the leaders of the Maidan protests and the new minister of the interior, Arsen Avakov, managed to reclaim the regional administration

building in his native Kharkiv, and Igor Kolomoisky, a Ukrainian oligarch, returned from de facto exile in Switzerland to lead the government of his native Dnipropetrovsk region. Avakov, an ethnic Armenian, and Kolomoisky, an ethnic Jew, emerged as the “saviors” of Ukraine from the Russian hybrid-war offensive, dispelling the myth of the nationalist or even fascist leanings of the new government in Kyiv and its supporters disseminated by Russian propaganda. By mid-May, it was clear that the Russian attempt to raise a revolt throughout southeastern Ukraine and create Novorossiiia, a state that would divide Ukraine in half and provide the Russian government with land access to the Crimea and Transnistria, had failed.

The Russian strategists of the hybrid war were much more successful in the Donbas industrial region on Ukraine’s eastern border with Russia, where Russian-backed separatists declared the formation of the Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics. On April 12, armed men led by Igor Girkin (nom de guerre Strelkov), a former colonel in Russian military intelligence and a veteran of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, seized the government and police headquarters in the city of Sloviansk in the northeastern Donbas. By the end of the month, militias led by the former Russian intelligence officers and reinforced by Cossacks, volunteers, and Chechen fighters brought in from Russia and funded with Russian money had seized administrative buildings in most cities and towns of the region, including its two major centers, the cities of Luhansk and Donetsk. They also seized radio and television stations, cutting off Ukrainian channels and bombarding listeners and viewers with misinformation about the new Kyiv government, which was called a “fascist junta,” and its plans, which allegedly included the desire to ban the Russian language in the region. Viewers and listeners were promised Russian salaries and pensions, which were significantly higher than those in Ukraine, and citizenship either in Russia or in the new state of Novorossiiia, which would include a good half of Ukraine.

The propaganda was effective: significant numbers of unemployed and semi-employed youth joined the rebel militias, where they were paid for their services. The resistance of the pro-Kyiv activists was crushed, and some of them were kidnapped and killed, while help from Kyiv failed to arrive. There were several reasons why the covert Russian invasion met little resistance in the Donbas. A major industrial powerhouse in Soviet times, it had become an economically depressed area with the switch from a command economy to the market after 1991. Like cities in rust belts throughout the world, Donetsk became a criminal capital. Many of its new elites had criminal backgrounds or connections, with the

region's best-known politician, Viktor Yanukovych, having served two prison sentences in his youth. While dependent on subsidies from Kyiv, the region had a strong sense of local pride and identity. Its ethnic composition differed from that of neighboring regions of Ukraine, as ethnic Russians constituted majorities in Donetsk and some other towns of the area. In 2001, only 24% of the inhabitants of Donetsk oblast and 30% of those in Luhansk oblast identified Ukrainian as their native language, as compared with 67% in neighboring Dnipropetrovsk oblast. Although ethnic Ukrainians made up 47% of the population of Donetsk, only 27% of the city's children received their education in Ukrainian. Russian was the dominant language on the streets of the Donbas, and the local elites exploited that fact to mobilize their electorate, claiming that the new Kyiv government was a threat to the Russian language.

Despite their strong sense of local identity, in early April 2014, 85% of Donetsk residents were opposed to the seizure of government buildings and installations by militias, and more than 60% favored the arrest of separatist activists. But the local political and business elites refused to act against the Russia-led insurgents. They either remained neutral or even tacitly supported the protests in the hope that the new government in Kyiv would be more willing to make a deal with them if the region was in turmoil. It was a short-sighted tactic. They would soon lose control over the rapidly developing crisis. As the leaders of the Russian-inspired and funded insurgency took a page from the local elite's playbook and used the theme of protecting the allegedly threatened Russian language and culture, the region's political and business elites decided to go with the flow. In the local referendum that took place on May 11, 2014, and was not recognized by Kyiv, voters were asked whether they supported the *samostoiatel'nost'* of the republic—a term that could mean either autonomy or independence. The leaders of the Donetsk republic declared that 89% of voters favored independence, and the corresponding figure in Luhansk was 96%, but these figures were as fraudulent as the ones released in the Crimean referendum, and many of those who voted later claimed that they wanted broad autonomy, not independence. The referendum took place without the presence of international observers and was not recognized by the international community.

The Ukrainian government launched a counteroffensive against the separatist takeover of the Donbas in mid-April, without apparent success until after the presidential election of May 25, 2014. It brought to power one of the leaders of the Euromaidan protests, Ukrainian business tycoon Petro Poroshenko, who won more than half the vote in the first round. On May 26, the Ukrainian army recaptured the Donetsk international

airport; on June 13, it took control of the port city of Mariupol on the Azov Sea; and on July 5, it took the city of Sloviansk, forcing the units of Colonel Igor Girkin, who by then had declared himself defence minister of the Donetsk People's Republic, to retreat to Donetsk. With the Ukrainian forces on the offensive, Russia increased its support for the separatist insurgents, now led by two Russian citizens with close links to the Russian government and security services—Colonel Girkin and the self-proclaimed prime minister of the Donetsk People's Republic, Aleksandr Borodai. In the second half of June, the Ukrainian government claimed and NATO intelligence confirmed the continuing influx from Russia to Ukraine, not only of trained militants but also of heavy military equipment, including tanks and multiple rocket launchers.

On July 17, 2014, the war in eastern Ukraine became truly international as Russia-backed separatists shot down Malaysian Airlines Flight MH 17, killing all 298 people on board. The destruction of a civilian airliner produced a flood of protests throughout the world, forcing U.S. and EU leaders to step up sanctions against Russian political and business elites associated with the undeclared war against Ukraine. But sanctions, which have an impact over time, had no immediate effect on Russian behaviour. If anything, Russia increased its involvement in Ukraine. In July, Russian artillery and missiles began bombarding Ukrainian territory from the Russian side of the border, and in August regular units of the Russian army crossed the border not just to reinforce Russian mercenaries and local militias but also to take the lead in fighting the Ukrainian armed forces and volunteer battalions. Thousands of Russian regular troops took part in the offensive launched by the separatists during the last week of August 2014. Some of them were captured by the Ukrainian military and paraded before television cameras as proof of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. By sending regular troops into a battle previously fought under the command of Russian military officers and with Russian equipment, Moscow stopped the Ukrainian advance and saved the self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk republics from imminent defeat.

In early September 2014, with the participation of Russia and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the two sides signed an agreement that resulted in a shaky ceasefire. In February 2015, a new ceasefire was negotiated in Minsk (Minsk II) by the leaders of Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine, only to be violated in the next few weeks by the takeover by the Russia-backed militants of a strategic railway centre in Debaltseve, previously held by the Ukrainian side. In 2015, despite the Minsk II agreement, Russia continued to provide military support for its puppet regimes in Donbas, sending not

only supplies and weapons, but also its military personnel, and causing the continuation of the sanctions introduced by the West to discourage Russia from the escalation of the conflict.⁹

The Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and then post-Soviet Russia all associated international power and security with control over territories along their borders. If they could not control such territories completely, they would partition them and control what they could. This was the rationale behind the partitions of Poland in the second half of the eighteenth century and the division of Germany after World War II. The “New Russia” project, launched by the Russian government in 2014, had as its primary goal the partitioning of Ukraine and the creation of a Russian-controlled state in the southern and eastern parts of the country. That project failed, as Russia managed to destabilize and control only a small part of the projected state of New Russia. While the Crimea was annexed right away, the Russian covert war in the Donbas created conditions for the establishment of another enclave of “frozen conflict” unrecognized by the rest of the world, not unlike Transnistria on the territory of Moldova and Southern Ossetia and Abkhazia on the territory of Georgia. These enclaves are used to apply pressure to Western-leaning republics. Chances are that this will be the primary function of the new frozen-conflict area in eastern Ukraine.

Many in Russia and around the world believe that the crisis is far from over, mainly because Vladimir Putin did not achieve most of what he wanted when he began his aggression against Ukraine. “Putin wanted to tie Ukraine to Russia, to encourage its entry into the Customs Union. He got the exact opposite,” wrote the Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov in October 2014. “He wanted Ukraine to maintain a neutral status. He failed miserably . . . He wanted to win the respect of the Ukrainian people. He created a long-term enemy . . . Putin wanted a ‘Novorossiiia’ stretching from Donetsk to Odesa. He got a small section of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts . . . [H]e wanted a corridor to the Crimea via Mariupol. He raised awareness and resistance among the locals and spurred Russians residents in Mariupol to dig trenches around the city . . . He wanted to seize land without firing a single shot, as in the Crimea. He got 4,000 people killed on both sides . . . Putin wanted to be recognized as a strong leader in world politics. He became an outcast.” Indeed, short of the annexation of the Crimea, few of the original goals set by the Russian leadership in the winter and spring of 2014 were achieved by the end of that year. And even that came with the huge cost to the Russian economy and international prestige.¹⁰

In the wake of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Vladimir Putin's (and, by extension, Russia's) stock in the West fell to an unprecedented low. Relatives of those who perished in the shooting down of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH 17 held him responsible for the deaths of their loved ones. But the damage goes far beyond the loss of prestige. According to the leaked Russian documents, Russia funds and runs in military, administrative and economic terms, the self-declared republics in the eastern part of Ukraine—an additional burden on the struggling Russian economy. In Ukraine, the cost is calculated not only in money and resources, but also in human lives. The war has claimed more than 9,000 dead and at least twice as many wounded. Millions left the conflict zone, creating a refugee crisis in Ukraine that dwarfs the current refugee problem of the European Union.¹¹

The hopes that the conflict can be resolved soon fade with every day of its continuation. The Minsk Agreements reached between Russia, Ukraine and the representatives of the pro-Russian separatist enclaves in eastern Ukraine in September 2014, and amended with the help of Germany and France in February 2015 show little signs of life. The political solution as agreed in February 2015 includes an end to hostilities; the withdrawal of all foreign military formations, including mercenaries, from the separatist republics; and the organization of local elections, which in turn should lead to the reestablishment of Ukraine's control over its borders with the Russian Federation. But the agreements fail to specify what comes first: the withdrawal of foreign military formations, which everyone understands are Russian, or the elections. Ukraine says sovereignty first. The Russian-backed rebels disagree.¹²

The realization of the "elections first" scenario would ensure continuing Russian control over the region once it formally reenters Ukraine. A Russian-controlled Donbas, which the war has turned into a humanitarian disaster zone, would thus become a ball chained to Ukraine's leg, making economic and political reforms currently under way in that country all but impossible. The key precondition for the implementation of the Minsk Agreements—the end to the military hostilities—remains to be an elusive target. August 2016 saw a significant increase of the Russian troops on the borders with Ukraine and the Ukrainian president Petr Poroshenko warned the world about Russia preparing a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In October 2016, the leaders of the four countries that participated in the Minsk negotiations in February 2015 (Minsk-II) agreed on the creation of a road map for the implementation of the Minsk agreements, but privately few European officials expect the agreements to be implemented anytime soon.¹³

What is at stake in the current Russo-Ukrainian conflict is much more than the future of the Donbas. Even after the loss of the Crimea and the *de facto* loss of much of the Donbas, Ukraine is still the second-largest post-Soviet state in territory, population and economic potential. Russia's current involvement in the Middle East notwithstanding, Moscow's geopolitical priority today and in the foreseeable future will remain the post-Soviet space. Without establishing firm control over that area, Russia will not be able to become a truly powerful player on the world stage. As in the past, the success of the latest integrationist project in Eurasia depends on the second-largest post-Soviet republic. What happens in Ukraine in the next few years will have a major influence on Russian behavior in the region and throughout the world. If Moscow loses Ukraine, its grip on the rest of the post-Soviet space will weaken, as will its ability to engage in foreign adventures elsewhere.

History, recent and more distant, provides a useful lens that helps to assess the importance of the Ukraine Crisis. Many speak today of a return of cold-war relations between Russia and the West. Some American politicians, including Hillary Clinton, compared Russia's readiness to use the rhetoric of protecting Russian-speakers abroad as a pretext for the invasion and annexation of foreign territories with the policies of Nazi Germany on the eve of World War II. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and annexation of the Crimea was indeed the first case of forcible takeover of territory in Europe since the end of World War II. Parallels were also drawn between the actions of Slobodan Milošević in Yugoslavia in the 1990s and Vladimir Putin in 2014—both had used the national minority's card as a pretext for war.¹⁴

Ukraine's movement away from its former imperial master toward an international center of gravity finds numerous parallels in the history of the disintegration of empires and the emergence of national states. The French helped the British colonies of North America free themselves from London; the British, Russians, and French helped the Greeks free themselves from Istanbul; and in 1918, the Germans backed the Ukrainian nation-building project against Bolshevik Moscow. What makes the Ukrainian situation different is that the European Union, the pole that attracts Ukraine most, is not a united polity or a state at all. The strength and attractiveness of the EU lie in its values and in the models of political, economic, and social organization of its member states. Its weaknesses are its cumbersome structure and difficulty in formulating a coherent foreign policy. Nor is the EU equipped to deal with military threats and war situations like the one in Ukraine. The EU has the ability to attract, but currently no political will to accept new members and no military muscle to defend those aspiring to join it.

The Ukrainian crisis reminded the world once again of the importance of the United States as a major stakeholder in European security and prosperity—the role it played for most of the twentieth century. The U.S., whose involvement in East European affairs diminished significantly in the wake of Second Gulf War, began its return to the region's political scene with the start of the Euro-Revolution in Ukraine. Washington, whose relations with Moscow have been tarnished by tensions in the Middle East in the wake of the Arab Spring of 2010, and suffered a further setback with Putin's return to the office of Russian president in the spring of 2012, has provided leadership in formulating a joint Western response to the crisis. That response, which included diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions against Russia, as well as financial and limited military assistance to Ukraine, helped stop Russian aggression in the fall of 2014.

With the United States and the European Union experiencing difficulties in agreeing on a common foreign policy objectives, what we see today is not a reenactment of the Cold War or a new version of the Great Game, a superpower rivalry that played itself out in Central Asia in the nineteenth century and in East Central Europe through most of the twentieth century. Both the United States and the European Union are at best reluctant participants in the current crisis. The Cold War years of trying to haul any Western-leaning country out of Moscow's net are long gone. Neither the United States nor the EU is trying to gain control of Ukraine or keep the country in its sphere of influence. The need to respond to Russian aggression comes from the simple fact that such blatant violation of bilateral and multilateral agreements signed by that country has shaken and continues to threaten the foundations of the post-World War II and post-Cold War political order, raising the specter of arbitrary border revisions, regional conflicts, and global instability. The origins of the crisis that caught both Washington and Brussels by surprise lie in Ukraine's desire to transform itself by choosing a Western model of development and Russia's determination to stop that from happening and keep the former province in its embrace. To be sure, what happens in Ukraine depends mainly on the actions of the Ukrainians themselves. But historical contextualization of the current crisis suggests that Ukraine's desperate attempts to free itself from the suffocating embrace of its former master have a much greater chance of success with strong international support. The goal should not be to move Ukraine from one sphere of influence to another but to reject imperial and post-imperial forms of domination, which should be relegated completely to the past, where they belong.

NOTES

1. Vladimir Putin, "Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii," March 18, 2014, <http://kremlin.ru/news/20603>. Cf. "Transcript: Putin says Russia will protect the rights of Russians abroad," *Washington Post*, March 18, 2015.

2. Peter Baker, "Pressure Rising as Obama Works to Rein in Russia," *New York Times*, March 2, 2014; Douglas Ernst, "Bill Clinton: Putin Trying to 're-establish Russian greatness,'" *Washington Times*, May 14, 2014; "Yatseniuk: Putin mriie vidrodyty SRSR," *BBC Ukraine*, April 20, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/politics/2014/04/140420_yatsenyuk_putin_ok.

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