

Strategic Foundations of the Ukraine Crisis

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Why do Russian-Ukrainian relations are of great concern to every Russian and Ukrainian? In some regards, what we are witnessing today is a delayed civil war which could have happened in the early 1990s with the collapse of the USSR, when the first leaders of independent Russia and Ukraine boasted that they had avoided a bloody divorce like that in Yugoslavia. In Russia, every other citizen has relatives in neighboring Ukraine, and the current developments are more a matter of domestic politics. When the Ukrainian government closes Russian Orthodox churches or bans a pro-Russian opposition political party,

the story gets immediate coverage on Russian state TV channels and comments from Russian politicians.

Each of the post-Soviet countries, which gained independence overnight on the same day, is in some way an experiment in state-building and in adjusting foreign and domestic political strategies. The peculiarity of the Ukrainian state experiment is underscored by the quandary: How to reconcile the two pillars of Ukrainian statehood—the western/Galician Ukrainian and the eastern/Russian communities? At some point, people representing the western regions got a stick in their hands and started using it against people in the east—that is why the 2014 Maidan won.

The path along which the Ukrainian experiment developed was a gradual curtailment of the presence and interests of the people with Russian identity. During his election campaign, Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky, in a bid to win support in the east of the country, promised that he would never ban education in Russian in schools. He pledged that Russian would have the status of the language of communication in the government sphere, and that he would protect the memory of the Great Patriotic War. However, as soon as he came to power, he started doing exactly the opposite.

Today, the Western media are presenting things as if big and strong Russia has attacked small Ukraine. In terms of the strategic balance of power, however, the picture is far from certain. In terms of physical size, Ukraine is the second largest nation in Europe after Russia. Ukraine's population is about forty million people—quite large by European standards. Its army is the third largest in Europe after those of Russia and Turkey—220,000-240,000 personnel. Military spending accounts for almost 6% of Ukraine's GDP (matching that of Israel), the armed forces have been modernized, and Kiev has purchased modern weapons systems from the West. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has openly said that Western instructors have trained tens of thousands of Ukrainian soldiers. By pumping Ukraine with weapons, the West sought to create a counterbalance to Russia that would

completely absorb its attention and resources, similarly to Pakistan in its confrontation with India.

In April 2022, Russian pranksters called the UK Secretary of Defense and, on behalf of the Ukrainian Prime Minister, asked how Britain would react to Kiev's planning to create nuclear weapons in Ukraine. The Defense Minister said that the UK would always support its Ukrainian friends. Many think that the West would never let Ukraine obtain nuclear weapons, but it is quite possible that the West may react in the same way as in the case of Israel: formally, the latter does not have WMDs but, as one Israeli leader has said, "If necessary, we will use it." Metaphorically speaking, the Americans put a bulletproof vest on the Ukrainians, gave them a helmet and pushed against Russia: "Good luck, buddy!"

As a result, this policy has created a relationship of one-sided dependence. Ukraine is highly dependent on the West, but the latter does not plan to support it forever.

How would Washington behave if Russia responded with a comparable threat? At one of the Senate hearings, U.S. Admiral Kurt W. Tidd has said that "Russia is expanding its presence in the region directly competing with the U.S. for influence in our hemisphere."¹ Imagine Russia interacting with Mexico in the way the West is now dealing with Ukraine: Mexico begins to rapidly militarize itself; thinks about creating its own missile program and obtaining nuclear weapons; and Mexicans recall their grievances from the 19th century when Texas was not yet part of the United States. What would Washington do, given the leaks about the desire of former President Donald Trump to invade Venezuela "because it's threatening regional security?"²

We are probably in the midst of the crisis which is far from coming to a head. The first diplomatic proposal that Russia made at the beginning

¹ Nominations before the Senate Armed Services Committee, First Session, 114th Congress. *Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate*, 4 February; 21 April; 9, 14, 21, 23, 30 July; 19 November; 9, 15 December [pdf]. Available at: www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114shrg24274/pdf/CHRG-114shrg24274.pdf [Accessed 26 May 2022].

² Trump Pressed Aides on Venezuela Invasion, US Official Says. *CNBC*, 4 July, 2018. Available at: www.cnn.com/2018/07/04/trump-pressed-aides-on-venezuela-invasion-us-official-says.html [Accessed 6 June 2022].

of its military operation was that Ukraine shall remain neutral, Crimea shall be recognized as Russian territory, and the Donbass republics shall be recognized as independent states. In response, Ukraine put forward its own demands: Russia clears off all Ukrainian territories with no concessions. The maximization of Ukrainian demands means that a point of balance has not yet been found in the ongoing military crisis. However, it has its own options for development.

In the first scenario, the current Ukrainian government and Russia enter into an agreement that takes into account Russian demands, and these agreements are recognized by the West as part of a European security package deal. Then the Russian-Ukrainian crisis gives way to a Russian-Western military-political confrontation, similar to the Cold War.

The second scenario suggests that the further development depends on the military situation on the ground. In that case, either a balance is inevitably found, or one of the sides wins. This option involves certain risks: the West may not recognize the results of the deal; a new Ukrainian government may arise, with an opposition government formed in exile. The West supports the government in exile in a way it assisted the Ukrainian underground in the 1950s.

The third scenario suggests a sharp escalation of tensions between Russia and the West. The Ukraine crisis may spread to some NATO countries, or the West may step up its sanctions war against Russia in a bid to destroy the foundations of Russian statehood. In this case, the risks of a nuclear collision will increase.

So far, the Western leaders have distanced themselves from such plans and said that they will not engage NATO forces in this conflict. Nevertheless, we have repeatedly seen how the West crosses its own “red lines.” Unfortunately, this can happen again.