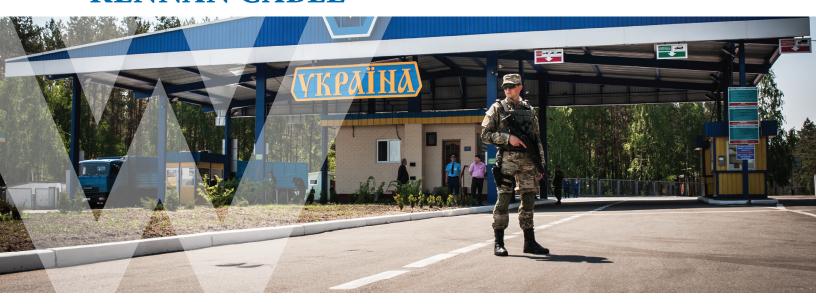Guard at Ukraine border. Photo courtesy of E.Kryzhanivskyi / Shutterstock.com

Conflict in Eastern Europe: From War to Stable Peace

Mikhail Minakov

The political and economic crisis in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, the war in Donbas, and U.S./EU-Russia tensions are often discussed under the rubric of the 'Ukrainian Crisis.' The phrase is a misnomer because both the causes and the effects of these momentous events are not confined to Ukrainian borders.

The future of Eastern and Western European nations is at stake. If the broader Eastern European crisis is not addressed now in an effective and comprehensive fashion, the EU member states will be faced with the most acute danger to their peaceful existence since 1945.

Multiple conflicts have been brewing on Europe's eastern edges for quite a while that have not attracted the attention or the response of developments in Ukraine. To mitigate the current crisis, Western leaders should take into account the peculiarities of the post-Soviet development of Russia, Ukraine, Georgia and other non- or partly-free nations in Eastern Europe. During 24 years of post-Soviet development, Ukraine proved to be a weak link in a network of authoritarian regimes that Douglas North called "limited-access social orders."[1]

First and foremost, any management strategy for the current crisis in Ukraine must take into

consideration the drastic change that the political regime in Russia has undergone. Russia's current regime is a result of Putin's top-down revolution of 2012-13 that enabled him to rein in democratic protest and reconsolidate power. The Kremlin then used the resources accrued during a decade of oil and gas windfalls to increase Russia's impact on Eastern and Western European political processes. The Kremlin's support of separatists in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, as well as far right groups in Italy, France and Hungary and some leftist movements in Germany, Austria, and Greece, is evidence of the type of foreign policy Russia has been putting together. Its coercive effect is based on the (ab)use of existing contradictions to create networks of Kremlin influence.

Contradictions in Eastern Europe

The past 24 years have turned the post-Soviet space into a region of extreme contradictions, both internal and external. While Western and Central Europe developed during the postwar era by building stronger ties between neighboring countries and bridging differences between them, Eastern Europe has been evolving into a region with high potential for conflict. Mechanisms for integration created by the republics of the former Soviet Union throughout the 1990s and 2000s were highly ineffective in addressing regional trade and security concerns. Long before the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, the situation in the region was highly flammable, as evidenced by repeated gas and trade wars between Russia and Ukraine, by trade conflicts between Belarus and Russia, and by the 2008 military conflict between Russia and Georgia. The absence of enduring conflict-prevention or conflict-resolution mechanisms in the region before or since is clear.

The failure to create functioning security and cooperation institutions was not the only problem faced by the Eastern European nations. Two other

destructive processes marred their post-Soviet development: a lack of communication between Eastern European peoples and the constant presence of unrecognized states in the region. During the 1990s and 2000s, the cultural and trade connections of the Soviet era faded away, while new ones failed to form. Younger generations of Ukrainians, Russians, and Georgians were raised with hostile visions of one another. Individual experience and direct knowledge of neighboring countries declined. Only the elites and marginal groups, such as labor migrants, had extensive experience travelling to neighboring countries. The vast majority of Ukrainians, Russians and Belorussians rarely left the confines of their countries or even oblasts to have personal experience in meeting the neighbors.

The region also includes a number of self-proclaimed polities that have little or no international recognition: Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia. Young people brought up in these unrecognized nations played an important role in the Russian-Georgian war of 2008 and replenished combatant forces on both sides of the current Russian-Ukrainian conflict. These regions have become breeding grounds for anti-Western sentiment, Soviet nostalgia, and separatism.

Internal factors have also contributed to the conflict-prone situation in Eastern Europe. Post-Soviet countries developed as institutionalized oligarchies that tended to erase the boundaries between public and private spheres and destroy the walls between the executive, legislative and judiciary bodies. These states also experienced authoritarian rule and the over-centralization of political power in their capitals. The gap in the 1991 promise of civic and economic liberties and the reality of a captured state in the 2000s was filled mostly with ethno-nationalist and neo-Soviet ideologies. The highly fragmented societies of Ukraine and its neighbors increase the prospects of "cold civil wars."

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Ukraine's political system has been one of the most fragile in the post-Soviet space. Unlike any other country in the region, Ukraine went through two revolutionary cycles: first in 1991–2004, and, second in 2005–2014. Both cycles started with a promise of liberation and both developed into an oligarchic regime with private interest groups taking over public institutions to amass and protect privately owned assets. Both cycles also resulted in an attempted coup by one of the groups to establish an authoritarian regime and both caused a mass protest movement that put the promise of freedoms back on the country's political agenda.

Every time a mass movement of any kind created political disruption in Ukraine, the country would balance on the brink of a split. In 2004 and 2005, the president-elect Viktor Yushchenko and the new prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko, the two leading members of the "Orange" coalition, had to seek an agreement with the elites of the Eastern regions of Donbas and Kharkiv to nip emerging separatist movements in the bud. A similar compromise was needed in 2014, when Viktor Yanukovich, president since 2010, fled the country, but no active and responsible players emerged on either side of the East-West divide.

Taking advantage of the weak interim government that was in power between February 22 and mid-March 2014, the Kremlin lent a hand to separatist movements in Crimea and in the eight oblasts of Ukraine's East and South. Russia used its covert and armed forces in the annexation of Crimea and later provided the separatist movements in Donbas with human resources and military hardware.

Eastern Europe is fertile ground for conflict today because of prior years of national and regional infighting. It has also proved fertile ground for Russia's neo-imperialist project.

Contradictions in Western Europe

Both cooperation and competition between the Russian Federation, the United States and the European Union have contributed to the current conflict across Eastern Europe. The politics behind the Eurasian Union, a Russia-led economic alliance of regional authoritarian regimes, and the GUAM, a West-leaning organization that includes Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova, have long added to the deepening cleavages in the region, especially in Ukraine.

At the same time, The Kremlin has long been building ties with anti-EU forces among radical groups in EU member countries. The purpose of Putin's "conservative Europe," an initiative made public in 2013 and aimed at creating a network of far-right populist parties from France, Italy, Hungary, and the UK, is to limit the possible European response to conflict in the East. Similar goals are apparently pursued by a network of European populist leftists that includes groups from Germany, Greece, Austria, and Spain. The major objectives of these networks are: to pose obstacles for the European Union to get involved in the affairs of Eastern Europe; create groups of influence in most EU member states; and divide Western political elites in their ability to respond to Russia's aggressive politics in the East.

The Kremlin has shown a formidable aptitude for using existing contradictions within the European Union, and the West in general, to disrupt and corrupt Western political efficiency.

Recommendations

In the current situation, it is wise to continue policies that limit the Kremlin's ability to fuel the war in Donbas. Western leaders should also continue to exert pressure on all sides of the conflict to cease

hostilities and address the humanitarian crises unfolding in the war zone (famine, deficit of health services, lack of basic security for civilians, etc.). It is critical for the future of wider Eastern Europe to bring fighting in the Donbas to an end and make it a platform for regional reconciliation.

These short-term measures will only have lasting impact if the more pervasive Eastern European crisis is adequately addressed:

- For all sides involved in peace-making activities: Local fighting in the Donbas must be dealt with as a symptom of a wider complex regional crisis in Eastern Europe.

- For the governments of the EU, U.S., Ukraine, Moldova, and eastern EU-member states: Conflict resolution and conflict prevention

mechanisms should be established across Eastern Europe as part of a comprehensive approach to end fighting and prevent new outbreaks.

- For the governments of the EU, U.S., Ukraine, Moldova and eastern EU-member states: the peoples of unrecognized states in Eastern Europe must have opportunities to reach out beyond their societies. The existing isolation of citizens of these nations provides Eastern European authoritarian regimes with legitimacy and support.

- For the EU: Europe should provide diplomatic and financial support, as practicable, to promote democracy and socio-cultural inclusivity in Ukraine.

The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of the author.

Endnotes

1. Douglass C North, John Joseph Wallis, Barry R. Weingast. "A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History," NBER Working Paper No. 12795, 2006, http://www.nber.org/papers/w12795

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