

The Political Destabilization and Fracturing of Ukraine

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When protesters gathered in the Ukrainian capital Kiev in November of last year, few could expect that the sequence of events that unfolded there would lead to the worst crisis between Russia and the western world since the collapse of the Soviet Union over two decades ago.

The political crisis that has gripped Ukraine has revived Cold War-era suspicions that are most noticeable in media coverage of the situation there. Political commentators and analysts have by-and-large laid the blame for the unrest squarely on the shoulders of Russia, while downplaying or omitting facts on the ground that suggest otherwise.

When protestors began occupying the Maidan [Independence Square] in Kiev in November of last year, Ukrainian society was deeply polarized over a proposed association agreement with the EU. Citizens in the agricultural west of the country generally were supportive of efforts to integrate into the EU, while those in the industrialized east favored closer ties with Russia due to their Russian ethnicity and familial ties to Russia.

Ukraine was approaching near-bankruptcy when ousted President Viktor Yanukovich decided to reject the EU deal, which would have required painful structural adjustments of the Ukrainian economy and liberalization measures. Yanukovich instead took up Russia's offer of \$15 billion in loans and a sharp discount on natural gas prices.

Yanukovich's decision to take Moscow's loan emboldened demonstrators at Maidan as protests grew increasingly more violent in the weeks ahead. Ukraine was in utter chaos by February as Yanukovich received death threats and was forced to flee to the country. Representatives of the protestors in Maidan became the new government, while the heads of ultra-nationalist groups such as Svoboda and the Right Sector were integrated into high-level ministerial positions.

The transfer of power in Ukraine was entirely undemocratic and unconstitutional, as ragtag paramilitary groups armed with baseball bats and molotov cocktails occupied government buildings and ousted a democratically elected leader. Yet, leaders in Washington and Brussels showed no hesitation to immediately recognize the new government Kiev, which remains – legally speaking – an unelected putsch regime.

In geopolitical terms, Washington and Brussels were keen to see Ukraine break from Moscow's sphere of influence, prompting the West not only to recognize the regime change in Kiev, but also to create conditions for it to be possible. American diplomats and politicians at the highest levels endorsed the protest movement. US Senator John McCain addressed

protestors at Maidan and dined with right-wing extremists from Svoboda.

US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland was photographed handing out cookies to protestors, and spoke on several occasions about how US government foundations donated some \$5 billion dollars to Ukrainian opposition groups over the last decade. Nuland was humiliated when a phone call between herself and US Ambassador to Ukraine leaked to the media.

The American officials discussed who they thought should be in power once Yanukovich was ousted. It is no coincidence that Arseniy Yatsenyuk – handpicked by Nuland for the role of prime minister – now occupies that position in Kiev’s new leadership. The United States has essentially midwived the new government in Ukraine while turning a blind eye to the abuses committed by ultra-nationalists groups allied to the new regime.

Svoboda and the Right Sector engineered the putsch by occupying the Maidan and attacking security forces. Members of these far-right groups openly espouse ethnic hatred against Jews and Russians and promote neo-Nazi ideals; their members wear symbols that include the Celtic cross, which has replaced the swastika for many modern white-power groups associated with the German Nazism.

Since seizing power, the putsch regime in Kiev has attempted to pass laws against the official use of Russian and other languages throughout the country, prompting outrage from eastern Ukrainians that culturally and linguistically identify themselves as Russian, who have now revolted to show their rejection of the new authorities, many storming government buildings and demanding a referendum on autonomy.

Russia refused to recognize the legitimacy of the new government in Kiev, and so it created conditions for a peaceful referendum to be held in Crimea at the request of the region’s autonomous government – in other words, Moscow’s actions had some legal basis. The population of Crimea is largely ethnic Russians, many of whom feared for the future under an ultra-nationalist dominated Ukraine.

Crimeans voted overwhelming in favor of rejoining Russia (where it was historically part of until 1954) in a peaceful referendum that European monitors observed. Russia was perhaps motivated to create conditions for a referendum in Crimea because it has a strategic naval base on the peninsula, which housed Russian troops in accordance with an existing treaty signed with Ukraine in the 1990s – in other words, the presence of Russian military personnel in Crimea was technically legal.

Moscow was characterized in western media as invading Ukraine, which it clearly didn’t do. Washington and Brussels denounced and refused to recognize the Crimean referendum, despite enthusiastically supporting self-determination movements in Kosovo, South Sudan and elsewhere when it serves their economic and geopolitical interests.

Even if one doesn’t agree with the way Russia influenced events in Crimea in the midst of a legal vacuum created by the putsch, the peaceful referendum in Crimea was undeniably more democratic and legitimate than the overthrow of a democratically elected president.

Washington and Brussels are now backing the unelected government in Kiev to the hilt, as they deploy the Ukrainian army in the east to put down the popular opposition. One may disagree with how eastern Ukrainians are conducting their protests – their occupation of

government buildings is clearly illegal – but they have undeniably legitimate social grievances and democratic demands.

Washington accuses Moscow of stoking protests in the east, but is unable to substantiate its claims with any hard evidence. Washington and Kiev are unwilling to admit that the protests in the east are grassroots opposition to regime change, so they would rather characterize their rebellion as the results of shadowy Russian interference.

Washington and Brussels championed the cause of pro-EU protesters occupying state buildings and denounced the elected government for sending in riot police armed with batons to disperse the crowds. Today, they denounce pro-Russian protesters as terrorists and endorse the unelected government's deployment of tanks, soldiers, and ragtag paramilitaries to crush the rebellion.

Citizen movements in eastern regions of Donetsk and Lugansk have held autonomy referendums, which Kiev, Washington, and Brussels have denounced. Although the vote was hastily arranged, nearly 90 percent of voters in both regions have voted in favor of self-rule. Despite the peaceful nature of the polls, militias aligned to Kiev killed several unarmed civilians who were waiting in line to cast their votes.

Following the poll results, the Donetsk region declared its self-proclaimed independence and announced its intention to join the Russian Federation. The response from Moscow has been for Kiev to engage in dialogue with eastern regions. President Vladimir Putin initially recommended that the referendums in the east be postponed, although leaders in the east held them anyway.

As the recent events show, Russia has influence over eastern Ukraine, but not control. There is no evidence that Russia plans to 'annex' parts of eastern Ukraine. President Putin has called for conciliatory conditions to be created in the county ahead of the May 25 presidential polls scheduled to take place. Still, the Western world is reluctant to denounce an unelected regime using tanks and lethal force to prevent its citizens from engaging in a peaceful democratic exercise.

The double standards over Ukraine are overwhelming and show clearly how the Western countries have a very selective commitment to democratic principles. Referendums in the east have had an undeniably large turnout, and are in fact representative of the powerful mass movement. The so-called 'free press' of the West is more concerned with portraying Russian President Putin as a dictator rather than producing even-handed coverage of the conflict in Ukraine.

As relations between Moscow and the West hit rock bottom and NATO troops advance toward Russia's border, there is a genuine danger that the events in Ukraine can spark a hot war if diplomatic avenues are not substantively pursued.

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