

The Unrest in Ukraine and the Return of History

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For months now, ordinary people in Ukraine and Crimea have awoken to a landscape of personal and political turmoil and even a redrawing of borders. Yet in another sense, the events are nothing new for the people of Crimea and Ukraine, who have been subject to centuries of internal and foreign domination and manipulation. The cloak and daggers scheme continues to this very day: behind the scenes and in cities of eastern Ukraine, government armed forces, militia, and roving pro-Ukraine gangs have engaged pro-Russian gunmen. As US-EU interests vie with Russian ones to determine the future of the Ukrainian nation, chaos and unrest are spreading. Caught in between is the interim government, led by President Oleksandr Turchynov and Prime Minister Arseny Yatsenyuk.

Weeks ago, when tanks and troops were first deployed to cities like Sloviansk and Donetsk, citizens lined the streets to offer their praise, thoughts, and concerns to the troops. Many undoubtedly cheered and prayed for them as well, but it wasn't unanimous. One story spoke of an elderly citizen telling forces that, to paraphrase, "the government is deceiving you" and "they (the government) are trying to set us against each other". It was not made clear (in my recollection, anyways) from the article whether the elder's tone was admonishing or pedagogical, but perhaps the omission was intentional. It may not make any difference whether the speaker was enraged, plaintive, or simply offering their own dispassionate opinion of the situation, if what was said is true or becomes true in the near future. If true, the divisions hinted at by this wise elder will lead to a civil war in Ukraine and mass carnage.

We have already seen many signs of trouble in recent months, from the unknown snipers in Kiev who killed protesters and police alike, to violence in Donetsk, Odessa, and other cities. Finally in May the mainstream media and general public are catching on to the severity of the conflict, but more astute observers have trumpeted warnings much earlier. Even the British Independent, a well-meaning but largely toothless newspaper due to its many corporate sponsors, had an article on March 3rd acknowledging the serious security issues across the country. Their title was "Ukraine 'on the brink of disaster' as Russian troop movements prompt stand-off". Meanwhile, around the same time, a bland CNN headline ran "US official says Russian troop movements near Ukraine raise concerns" and FOX ran the nondescript "Russian troop movements 'worrying' officials". The New York Times could only muster up a "Russia's shifting of border force stirs US worry".

The media's fixation on Russian troops and their immediate whereabouts mask more important questions to ask, such as: why is the US fully supporting the interim Ukrainian government? This is a regime that is deploying troops against its own people. Shouldn't the US be prudent and take a more neutral stance? Also, another question to ponder is why has Russia acted so rashly in deploying troops to Crimea and subsequently annexing it? Many answers have been offered to this, and the consensus view (although tenuous, and nowhere near unanimous) is that Russia and President Putin have acted out of a paranoid fear of Ukraine and nearby nations falling further out of Russia's orbit and further down the path of

EU integration and a pro-US stance. Vladimir Putin's actions then can be viewed as reflexive and defensive, which he undoubtedly has already rationalized them as, instead of unstable and overtly aggressive. The US is struggling to comprehend this line of thinking, instead fuelling its own paranoid fears of Russian military, spies, and black operations possibly underway in east and south Ukraine. Europe has already been coming around to this idea of a reflexive, as well as stubborn and proud Russia, rather than an out of control power-crazy Putin. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, no doubt influenced by prominent German businesspersons, has already vacillated on tougher sanctions for Russia, and most of Europe agrees and will continue to unless conditions in Ukraine worsen considerably due to Russian interference.

In understanding Ukrainian current events it is important to remember its past. Crimea, erstwhile belonging to Ukraine, now reverts to Russia, who controlled the peninsula during the late Russian empire and then later under the USSR. In 1954, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea from the Russian province to the Ukrainian one. This was possibly done for administrative reasons, or perhaps to enhance solidarity and Soviet prestige with Ukrainian leaders and communists. Also, we have to include the possibilities of Khrushchev's inner circle simply wanting to thank Ukraine for its citizens' hard fighting against the Nazis in World War II, or perhaps, its gratitude for Ukrainian compliance with brutal and deadly Soviet rule in the recent past.

Various political theorists have pointed out Ukraine's weak and fractious government in recent times. One important author is Samuel Huntington, who prophetically asked in his seminal 1996 book *Clash of Civilizations* whether Ukraine was or would soon become a cleft (divided) country. He pointed to the skewed presidential voting turnout in Ukraine, with the majority of eastern provinces voting for the pro-Russian candidate, and western provinces backing pro-Euro and US candidates. In Huntington's book and 1993 essay[1], he posits that conflict in the post-Cold War era would not be between nations, but between great civilizations. He identifies eight major current civilizations and predicts that conflict will occur on the boundaries of these areas. One boundary area is between his version of Western civilization, including western Europe, the settler nations (US, Canada Australia, New Zealand), most of central Europe, and a Russian civilization. One nation caught straddling this line is Ukraine, with easterners sympathetic to Russia, socialist and communist political ideas, and Orthodox Christianity. Conversely, western Ukrainians seem to prefer Euro-style capitalism, democracy, and Protestant and Catholic beliefs. As events unfold I would bet that there are more than a few people within the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, National Security Council, and State Department who are dusting off their Huntington. At least they should be.

Another important theorist is Huntington's former student, Francis Fukuyama. Fukuyama's influential *The End of History and the Last Man*, written in 1989 in essay form and expanded into a 1992 bestseller, was one of the most talked-about foreign policy works for years afterwards, and for good reason. Fukuyama's worldview hinges on the disintegration of the USSR, the ascendancy of the US and its higher meaning for democracy. In his view, corrupt and freedom-crushing regimes such as Soviet Communism would disappear into the sands of time as liberal democracies expand across the globe. Western, free-market governments would promote their ideals in the developing world, and these ideals would take hold and root. Capitalism would become the entire world's engine for growth, and if managed astutely, poor countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America and elsewhere would be on track to enter the rich, industrialized world. And in that three year period from '89 to '92, you

couldn't really blame Fukuyama for thinking so. Berlin was reunited, Gorbachev was on his best behavior to keep the US happy, or at the least placate its leaders, and then, in December 1991, the USSR vanished out of existence.

There are many potential pitfalls to the expansion of democracy and capitalism that Fukuyama discusses, and he acknowledges that there may be temporary setbacks and hiccups along the way. Yet over the long term, Fukuyama predicted that conditions would improve throughout the world as democracy is broadened and deepened in the world community. However, predictive power is only useful for the future, not just to glitz up the current policy zeitgeist for the eyes of American politicians and strategists wearing their all-too-obvious rose-colored glasses. Fukuyama overlooked the eastward expansion of NATO and its consequences, even as leaders from Yeltsin to Putin expressed serious reservations, and later, anger. Fukuyama did, however, remind and warn us of one important consequence of the libertine democratic world: the last man, more inclined to enjoy the bread and circus mind-state of consumerism than to worry about faraway geopolitical struggles and the hard decisions that need to be made in interstate conflicts. By sewing together an essentially Kantian and Hegelian framework of world politics with a Nietzsche-influenced take on our fragmented modern culture, Fukuyama convinced many readers of his theory with his undeniably massive intellect and led many more to soberly consider their own beliefs and biases. However, the mish-mash of disparate ideas created a sort of Frankenstein monster, allowing US and western policymakers to believe they could do no wrong, since they were invariably on the right side of history. This led to a metaphysical as well as a very material hubris within US domestic and foreign policy in the 1990s which continues today. This sort of imperial pride has permeated US foreign policy discourse and threatens to doom us not just in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also through our endless deficit spending and debt spiral. While these counterweights to US hegemony are widely understood now, they were not given considerable thought during the 1990s. Just consider the blind spots of 90's-era US policy-makers, obvious to us now, when they started throwing around terms like "hyperpower", "full-spectrum dominance", and "responsibility to protect (R2P)".

In 2014 we have about 1 billion people still living in extreme poverty and facing hunger and malnourishment (individuals or families only making a few dollars a day) and perhaps another two billion or more living in a general state of squalor. Western rhetoric, in media and political circles, tries to brush it off, using disingenuous terms to describe poor people as "food insecure" and "economically disadvantaged". If our system of democracy and global capital is not able to help those most in need, then we all need to take a good hard look within ourselves and our systems of governance. Other possible disasters loom with oil and nuclear spills, climate change, rising sea levels and overpopulation, yet liberal democracies as well as autocracies of all shapes and sizes continue to drag their feet on these issues. Western governments keep playing dumb, passing the buck onto the next generation as farmland, metals, virgin forests, fossil fuels and more are destroyed or degraded to keep profits flowing smoothly into the hands of the super-rich. Ukraine would be a huge asset gain for western business people, and this partially explains the unflinching support of the United States for the new Ukrainian leaders.

The crises brewing in Ukraine cannot be untangled from its own strange and tumultuous history, the vagaries of global capitalism, or the grand visions and strategies (however flawed) of people like Huntington and Fukuyama. The retaking of Crimea and its referendum to join Russia is now simply a fait accompli, as most analysts realize, despite the half-

hearted whining of the US, Ukraine, and some of its more servile allies. If history is indeed returning, then we have to hope that leaders such as President Obama and Putin will take measured, reasonable approaches to help resolve the conflict in Ukraine. With two nuclear powers supporting opposing sides of the violence, the end of history itself becomes a very real threat.

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Notes:

[1] Huntington's 1993 essay can be found for free at:
<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/48950/samuel-p-huntington/the-clash-of-civilizations>

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