

Free for all on the Maidan

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The break-up of the Soviet Union left fault-lines held over from a union of many republics and regions. On the USSR's eastern border, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan were left with territorial disputes, ethnic and linguistic groups on the wrong side of political borders, dysfunctional economic and trade patterns and strategic dilemmas.

Ukraine is large and assertive, but suffers from all these problems. The country had a central position in the USSR: leading Soviet political figures were Ukrainian, its Donbass was an industrial hub and the Slav big three that ended the USSR consisted of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. After Soviet disintegration, the country continued economically on Russian lines, dominated by oligarchs and *apparatchiks*, but the oligarchs are Ukrainian and the policy is its own, leading to WTO membership in 2008. The country is however dependent on Russia for energy, with Russian gas pipelines to Europe passing through Ukraine — a fact made abundantly clear in 2006 when Russia briefly suspended supplies over a price dispute with Ukraine, sparking alarm among European consumers. But the transit status has also been useful to Ukraine, since Russia has yet few alternative routes to Europe.

In the 22 years of independence, Ukraine sought a narrative embracing all its regions and citizens. Although there is an East-West divide, this attempt has not been in vain. Ukrainian governments have straddled ethnic and regional divisions, and until now conflict between the Russians and Ukrainians who share this country has been rare. East Ukraine is politically, religiously, linguistically, culturally and economically close to Russia. Twenty five percent of Ukraine's 45 million are ethnic Russians, and Russian is widely spoken in parts of the east and south. Russian has enjoyed equal status with Ukrainian; in some areas, including Crimea, it is the main language. Regions where Russian predominates almost exactly match those that voted for President Yanukovich in 2010, an election deemed free and fair by the West. The West of the Ukraine, on the other hand, is agricultural, closer to Poland and speaks Polish and Ukrainian; in religion it is Uniate, a mixture of Orthodox Christianity and Catholicism. Western Ukrainians murdered Poles by the hundreds in the aftermath of World War II when they occupied the area, but all that is forgotten in Poland's quest for markets and Kiev's quest for Europe.

The crisis began in November,

2013, when Ukraine's cabinet announced postponement of a proposed association agreement with the European Union. Russia feared that the move would preclude Ukraine's membership of its own Eurasian Customs Union, and threatened to impose higher energy prices. The EU failed to provide a financial package to balance Russian retaliation. Yanukovich played for time, while anti-government protesters, supporting closer ties with the EU, called for his resignation and occupied Maidan Nezalezhnosti [Independence Square]. The EU and the US backed the protest, which spread across the country. The Maidan movement turned into a free-for-all with contrasting chauvinist and egalitarian aspects. Public buildings in Western Ukraine were occupied, and bouts of vio-

lence injured hundreds and left around 100 people dead. In February, the EU brokered an agreement with Yanukovich that was rejected by the protesters, and the Rada [parliament] then voted to oust the president and hold new elections in May. Since then, all official policy has been decided in consultation with the Maidan.



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The interim government projects itself as pro-EU and pro-US: its tenor is anti-Russian. Pandering to the Maidan sentiment by the authorities has led to grave mistakes, such as the disbanding of the Berkut paramilitary muscle-men, who are now in the employ of anti-Kiev groups in the east and Crimea, and have, in effect, become a freelance group of mercenaries. In another of its early actions, the government de-recognized the official status of the Russian language, which incensed the Russian speakers. The Maidan sought to establish control in eastern Ukraine, drawing in those never before seen in politics, but reaction was swift. In Crimea, a movement for greater autonomy began, and popular protest against local Maidans followed, involving thousands in Donetsk, Lugansk and

Kharkiv in demonstrations that led to beating up Maidan supporters, hoisting the Russian flag, ripping up the Ukrainian flag and burning effigies of Maidan leaders.

Ukraine's body politic is deeply divided, making any consensus almost impossible. Politicians as a class stand discredited, considered incompetent and corrupt. Figures like the former prime minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, are oligarchs with large establishments and questionable probity. Unknowns are entering the political arena and destabilizing institutions. Apart from Tymoshenko, the former world heavyweight boxing champion, Klitschko, will be a prominent presidential candidate in the May polls.

Moscow cannot afford to be passive; Ukraine is pivotal to Russian security and its project to bring a

strong Eurasian Union into being. The Maidan, and the EU/US use of it, threw President Putin off balance. The number of refugees fleeing to Russia has mounted to 150,000, and refugee camps are planned in the Rostov region. Relying on Yanukovich to restore order, despite his support from oligarchs and the Donetsk neighbourhood, is futile. Describing the insurgents as fascists, neo-Nazis and anti-Semites will also not help, though it is true that these words fit ultra-radical groups like Svoboda who have 37 Rada seats and Pravy Sektor who were prominent among the Maidan protesters, because the West considers them useful agents against Russia. Direct military action also will not help; not least, it will bring great pressure on the rouble.

Waiting for a solution until after Ukraine's May elections is ruled out because of the situation in Crimea. The peninsula was transferred by fiat from Soviet Russia to the Ukraine in 1954 as an autonomous province. This majority Russian-speaking region is of prime strategic significance to Russia, whose Black Sea Fleet has had its base for 200 years at Sevastopol. After USSR's

break-up, a lease agreement valid till 2042 has allowed the Russian fleet to continue operating there in exchange for Russia supplying discounted natural gas. By this lease, Russia can station 161 aircraft, 388 warships and 25,000 armed men in Crimea. After the Maidan's triumph in Kiev, the Crimean Rada and local Russian population have taken the path to independence, and a referendum will take place this month. Russia's Upper House has left policy to Putin even as Kiev threatens action, supported in the peninsula by the Crimean Tatars. The upshot has been that forces without official affiliation — clearly Berkut and Russian troops without insignia — have moved to secure strategic locations. This has drawn accusations of a Russian invasion from Kiev and western capitals. Putin is sending more forces to safeguard Russian base interests and ethnic Russians in a move reminiscent of the creation of two Russian protectorates within Georgia in 2008. Apart from Crimea, there are pro-Russian strongholds elsewhere in eastern Ukraine, like Donetsk and Kharkiv. The burning question is whether Putin will also protect those areas militarily.

Hope for future economic stability is fading. Ukraine's economy is smaller now than it was in 1992. Russia's monetary support will be terminated, as will Eurasian Union tariff concessions. Ukraine needs \$35 billion over the next two years to pay public sector salaries, energy bills from Russia and avoid default. It has a current account deficit at 8 per cent of GDP and the currency has already lost considerable value. If the US, EU and IMF come to the rescue, the *quid pro quo* will be 'shock therapy': stringent conditionalities including reduction of subsidies for heavy industry and energy. Kiev has said it will accept these, but protestors in the east condemn them, "Europe wants us as slaves," reads one poster. America's Senator McCain and its local ambassador have rhetorically declared, "America is with you! ... We stand ready to support you", but the EU does not have the resources either to bail out or integrate an impoverished Ukraine.

So the Cold War is back in Europe with a vengeance, centred on a Ukrainian ulcer that defies effective treatment. It is no longer a question of the future of Yanukovich or the EU association agreement, but which power centre in eastern Europe will prevail, the US/EU/Nato or the Russians, and what role popular forces will play in this. In this fraught scenario, it is important that the hot and cold warriors in Washington and Moscow and on the ground in Kiev, Donetsk, and Simferopol cede space and time to diplomats and peacemakers. Only negotiation, not war, can reconcile the polar opposites.