

The Conflict in Ukraine - The Geopolitics of Separatism and Divergent Identities (Commentary)

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This commentary seeks to examine the nature of the causes of the conflict in Ukraine, particularly in relation to the country's geographic and geopolitical position and the tendencies toward separatism that this position breeds. The commentary then explores the various positions of the main actors involved in the conflict, including Ukraine, Russia, the separatist forces in Donbas, and the West. The commentary concludes with a consideration of the outlook for the conflict, which will be shaped by the divergent positions of these actors and geopolitical constraints on both the military and diplomatic levels.

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Introduction

The conflict in Ukraine has dominated the Eurasian region for more than five years, serving as a major catalyst for the broader standoff between Russia and the West that continues to this day. Over 13,000 people have been killed and nearly 2 million displaced in the conflict, one which has reverberated and sent ripple effects well beyond Ukraine. The conflict in Ukraine has been a key factor in bringing relations between Moscow and the West to their lowest point since the end of the Cold War, and it shows no signs of abating anytime soon.

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At the heart of the conflict lies the issue of separatism, which stems from cultural and political differences over identity in Ukraine and divergent attitudes toward the state and its domestic and foreign policy. These differences and divisions in Ukraine existed well before the start of the conflict in 2014, but numerous factors have served to exacerbate them over the past decade. These include Ukraine's volatile political evolution, a more dynamic geopolitical environment in the region, and the involvement of external powers in the conflict.

The Ukrainian conflict is not the only one stemming from separatism and identity in Eurasia. Indeed, it is part of a larger phenomenon that dates back to the late Soviet period and that has played out in various forms and in numerous theatres – from Eastern Europe, to the Caucasus, to Central Asia. Nevertheless, the conflict in Ukraine is perhaps one of the most illustrative examples of a local separatist conflict having implications on a regional and even global scale (Russia–West standoff), one that offers lessons well beyond its borders.

The origins and drivers of the Ukraine conflict

On the surface, the conflict in Ukraine, which began in the spring of 2014 and continues to this day, had a very specific trigger. That trigger was the EuroMaidan uprising, which started as a series of protests in central Kyiv (Kiev) in November 2013 following the decision of then-president Viktor Yanukovich abruptly to pull out of negotiations with the EU over an association and free trade

agreement in favor of closer ties with Russia. These protests were initially small and mostly made up of pro-EU students and young people, but a heavy-handed security crackdown on the demonstrations caused the protests to swell in size to hundreds of thousands of people across a wide social spectrum and to take on a more broadly anti-government nature.

Over the course of three months, these protests –known as EuroMaidan after Maidan Nezalezhnosti square in which they were concentrated – evolved to incorporate numerous elements opposed to the Yanukovich administration, from traditional opposition groups to regular citizens to radical and ultranationalist groups such as Right Sector. It was the latter element, although relatively small in size, that participated in clashes with security forces at the apex of the protest movement in February 2014. These clashes led to more than 100 deaths and eventually led to the overthrow of the Yanukovich government at the end of the month.

The ousting of Yanukovich produced several ripple effects. One was a strategic shift in Ukraine’s foreign policy away from Russia and toward the West, which was cemented by the election of a pro-Western president, Petro Poroshenko, and an accompanying pro-EU majority in parliament. Further effects included two major reactionary moves by Russia: first, the annexation of Crimea and shortly thereafter the support of a pro-Moscow separatist rebellion in Eastern Ukraine. It is this rebellion that led to the current conflict in Eastern Ukraine, which has included the establishment of the so-called “Donetsk People’s Republic” (DPR) and “Luhansk People’s Republic” (LPR) in Donbas in April 2014 and their ongoing military clashes with Ukraine’s security forces.

Thus, the conflict in Ukraine was a direct reaction to the EuroMaidan uprising. However, there is a deeper driver behind the conflict, and that is the geographic position of Ukraine. The country lies on the geopolitical fault line between Russia and Europe, the so-called “European borderlands.” Ukraine’s location in the wide-open plains of Eastern Europe offers few geographical barriers, making the country a traditional invasion route from Russia into Europe, and vice versa. Historically, this location, along with Ukraine’s abundance of agricultural,

mineral, and energy resources, has made the country of strategic interest to Russia and European powers alike.

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The historical competition between Russia and Europe has had a significant impact on Ukraine's political and cultural evolution. Due to its incorporation into and contestation among numerous empires from both east and west, from the Russian Empire and Soviet Union to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Ukraine has been

divided and polarized between a Europe-oriented and largely Ukrainian-speaking western and central part of the country, and a Moscow-oriented and largely Russian-speaking east and south.

Following Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 – the first time that the country was fully independent for hundreds of years – these polarizations were clearly reflected in voting patterns, which were broadly split between east and west along this political/cultural cleavage. This produced sharp political swings in the post-Soviet era, including the 2004 Orange Revolution, which brought into power a pro-Western government led by Viktor Yushchenko in 2005, and the victory of the pro-Russian Yanukovich in the 2010 presidential elections.

These polarizations were most acutely felt following the EuroMaidan uprising. With the government shifting its orientation

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once again toward the West, the most pro-Russian parts of the country became either part of Russia (as with Crimea) or de-facto independent statelets with significant economic and military support from Moscow (as with “DPR” and “LPR”). This has, in essence, cemented and radicalized the long-running divisions between political and cultural affiliations in the country, leading to the political and security situation in which Ukraine currently finds itself.

Current status and positions of the various players

The conflict in Ukraine, which came about as a result of these differences in identity and the separatist tendencies it has spawned, has several important players. These include Ukraine, the separatist regimes of the “DPR” and “LPR,” Russia, the US,

and the EU, each of which has its own unique position when it comes to the conflict.

From Ukraine's perspective, the conflict in Donbas is a product of Russian aggression and Moscow's desire to keep Kyiv in Russia's orbit and out of the Western alliance system. To Kyiv, the separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk are merely Russian proxies, and Ukraine's ultimate goal is to integrate these territories back into the Ukrainian state and expel – whether militarily or diplomatically – Russian forces from this region. This goal is currently not achievable from a purely military perspective, so Ukraine is engaging in diplomatic negotiations in the hope that it can secure enough Western support (in the form of economic/security assistance as well as pressure against Russia in the form of sanctions) to be able, eventually, to regain control of the separatist territories of Eastern Ukraine.

From Russia's perspective, the conflict in Donbas is a result of an unconstitutional coup which overthrew a legitimately elected government in Ukraine. According to Moscow, the EuroMaidan uprising led to an illegal (and, crucially, Western-supported) change of government in Ukraine, with the majority of people in Crimea and in the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk not accepting this change of power. Russia thus supported these people's right to self-determination and refusal to be a part of Ukraine under the post-Maidan government (which was made official in Crimea via a referendum to become part of Russia, and has been unofficially supported in the formation of the "DPR" and "LPR"). Russia's ultimate goal is for Ukraine to be within Moscow's sphere of influence – or at the very least neutral – in terms of its foreign policy. Absent that outcome, Moscow is determined to undermine any efforts by the Ukrainians to integrate with the West. Thus, Russia's support for the separatist conflict stems from its desire to disrupt Ukraine's Western alignment and undermine its stability and coherence as a state in its current orientation.

When it comes to the separatists themselves, their goals are largely aligned with those of Moscow. The separatists do not accept the Ukrainian government as legitimate in its current form and thus refuse to be a part of it. In order to be re-incorporated back into the Ukrainian state, the separatists want a say in decision making regarding foreign and defense policy, at least on a local/regional

level. While the separatists do have some level of autonomy within the “DPR” and “LPR” on internal management of these territories, their reliance on Russia for military and financial support ultimately makes their position and actions in terms of negotiations vis-à-vis Ukraine dependent on decision making in Moscow.

From the US perspective, Washington is broadly in lock step with the position of Ukraine, i.e., that the conflict was a product of Russian aggression and the onus is on Moscow to withdraw its troops and its support for the separatists to end the conflict. To this end, the US has ramped up its support for Ukraine in the form of military assistance, including joint training efforts and the supply of lethal weapons like Javelin anti-tank missiles, and Washington has also increased its pressure on Moscow in the form of sanctions. But the US position regarding the Ukrainian conflict is also different from that of Kyiv in the sense that it is part of a broader standoff between Washington and Moscow which spans a gamut of issues, from Syria, to arms control, to Venezuela. The US support for Ukraine can thus be seen to have an immediate and direct interest in aiding Ukraine’s Western integration efforts, but there is also a deeper geopolitical element in play in the form of the US containment strategy toward Russia, where Washington seeks to undermine Moscow’s influence in sensitive areas along the former Soviet periphery and weaken Russia’s position as a global power.

The EU has a broadly similar stance to the US when it comes the Ukraine conflict, in the sense that the bloc supports Kyiv’s Western integration efforts and has also passed sanctions against Russia over its involvement in the conflict. However, the EU position is more complex and nuanced given that the bloc represents 28 different member states, some of which have different positions when it comes to both Ukraine and Russia. For example, countries in Central/Eastern Europe, like Poland and Lithuania, largely mirror the position of the US and are some of Ukraine’s staunchest pro-Western advocates, while countries such as Germany and France are far more measured in their support of Ukraine and their antagonism to Russia. This discrepancy is due to several factors: Germany and France have less geographic exposure to and greater commercial ties with Russia (particularly Germany), and both Berlin and Paris are less enthusiastic about Ukraine’s EU/NATO integration, given

“enlargement fatigue” and internal issues within these blocs. The result is a less aggressive EU sanctions regime against Russia compared to that of the US and a somewhat more balanced line on seeking concessions from both Russia and Ukraine in order to end the conflict in Donbas.

Outlook for the conflict

Given these conflicting positions of the various players, it is perhaps no surprise that diplomatic efforts to end the conflict in Ukraine have proven inconclusive. Despite numerous efforts to negotiate an end to the conflict – most notably within the context of the Minsk protocols, first established in September 2014 and renewed in February 2015 in the form of the Minsk II agreement – the differences in interpretation over the nature and timing of implementation of these agreements between the various actors have until now made these protocols ineffective in resolving the conflict.

For example, according to Ukraine, whose position is backed by the US, Russia must first withdraw all of its troops and weaponry from the conflict zone in order to move forward with the political components of the deal, particularly granting autonomy and “special status” to the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. According to the “DPR” and “LPR” separatists, whose position is backed by Russia, political recognition must be granted first before any moves are made on the security front (indeed, Russia formally refuses to acknowledge that its forces are even present in Eastern Ukraine).

The divergence of these positions and the refusal of both sides to compromise meaningfully have thus produced a stalemate in the conflict. While the war is not as active or intense as it was in its initial years, with both the Ukrainian side and separatists firmly establishing their areas of territorial control, there are nevertheless constant ceasefire violations along the line of contact and both sides continue to inflict casualties on a regular basis. The war in Ukraine has thus essentially turned into a “frozen conflict,” not unlike other conflicts in the post-Soviet

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space, including Nagorno-Karabakh (between Azerbaijan and Armenia), Abkhazia and South Ossetia (between Georgia and Russia), and Transnistria (between Moldova and Russia), all of which had similar roots of clashes in identity and separatism, and show no signs of resolution anytime soon.

This is not to say that the conflict in Ukraine is destined to continue indefinitely in its current form. Indeed, in recent months, some progress has been made in mitigating the conflict, particularly at a tactical level. An important catalyst for such change was the election of Volodymyr Zelensky as president of Ukraine, which changed the political dynamics of the conflict. Zelensky, an outsider who had never previously held political office, campaigned on a platform of rooting out corruption on the home front and ending the conflict with Russia, and he defeated the incumbent, Poroshenko, by a record margin in the elections of May 2019.

Zelensky's victory was followed by a major prisoner exchange between Ukraine and Russia in July 2019, which included the release of more than two dozen Ukrainian sailors captured by Russia in a standoff in the Sea of Azov during Poroshenko's tenure. This exchange was then followed by the pullback of troops and weaponry from three conflict sites –Stanitsa Luganskaya, Zolote, and Petrovske– which had been agreed in the previous year but had not been fully implemented until Zelensky came to office. This successful implementation has in turn unlocked high-level diplomatic negotiations in the format of the Normandy Four (Russia, Ukraine, Germany, France), whose heads of state met for the first time in more than four years on December 9, 2019 to discuss the conflict from a broader political standpoint.

Despite this tactical progress in terms of prisoner exchanges and troop and weaponry pullbacks, there are still significant challenges for such progress to be translated into political concessions, and it remains far from a diplomatic resolution to the conflict. While granting some level of political autonomy for the “DPR” and “LPR” is under consideration by the Ukrainian government (and ultimately would be necessary to establish a political settlement), there is a divergence between what the separatists and their backers in Moscow want and what the public in Ukraine is willing to accept.

Indeed, there have been several protests in Kyiv in recent months warning against what many view as “capitulation” to Russia in the event of any meaningful political concessions to the separatists. Given the dynamic nature of Ukraine’s political system, Zelensky has to treat negotiations carefully, or else risk his own political capital and potentially even his position as president – meaning that Zelensky’s decision making is significantly constrained by public opinion.

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On Russia’s part, Moscow may have an interest in engaging in negotiations without having the genuine willingness to offer major concessions in order to achieve a resolution of the conflict. If Russia were to grant international observers access to its border with the separatist territories, as Kyiv and Washington are calling for, this would essentially be sacrificing Moscow’s own position in the conflict, something that the Kremlin is not willing to do. Western sanctions may be economically painful to Russia, but Moscow has calculated that the concession of abandoning the separatist territories would come at a higher political and strategic cost. This is why Russia continues to support the separatist territories, and it is also why Moscow has advocated for Ukraine to negotiate with the separatists directly and why Russian officials classify the conflict as a “civil war,” rather than a “war of Russian aggression,” as per Ukraine and the US.

Conclusion

The conflict in Ukraine is not unique in its nature. It is a product of separatism and divergent political and cultural identities, features that are shared among numerous frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space. As with those conflicts, the Ukrainian conflict is exacerbated by the strategic competition for geopolitical influence among external powers, most notably Russia and the US. In this sense, the scale and ripple effects of the Ukrainian conflict have been unique.

Due to the deep roots of the different political and cultural identities within Ukraine, and the divergent interests of the

various parties to the conflict, a comprehensive political solution, appropriately brokered and respected by all the parties, will be extremely difficult to achieve. It is more likely that the Ukrainian conflict will become the latest in a series of long-term “frozen conflicts” that could take several years, if not decades, to resolve. Nevertheless, the conflict in Ukraine has offered, and will continue to offer, instructive lessons about what drives identity-based divisions within a particular political space, and how those divisions can be shaped and manipulated in the sphere of “great power” politics.

At a broader strategic level, the conflict can be expected to continue until the position of one or more of the actors changes in a strategic way – whether that be the military strength of Ukraine’s forces, Russia’s own strength, or the willingness of the US to intervene more directly. The tactical elements of the conflict are certainly subject to change, but the broader political contours of the conflict will be shaped by the various (and often contradictory) strategic interests of the different sides. These differences, in turn, will be much more difficult to overcome.