

Ukraine's Increasing Polarization and the Western Challenge

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By Eugene Chausovsky

Just days before the Ukrainian crisis broke out, I took an overnight train to Kiev from Sevastopol in Crimea. Three mechanics in their 30s on their way to jobs in Estonia shared my compartment. All ethnic Russians born and raised in Sevastopol, they have made the trip to the Baltic states for the past eight years for seasonal work at Baltic Sea shipyards. Our ride together, accompanied by obligatory rounds of vodka, presented the opportunity for an in-depth discussion of Ukraine's political crisis. The ensuing conversation was perhaps more enlightening than talks of similar length with Ukrainian political, economic or security officials.

My fellow passengers viewed the events at Independence Square in an overwhelmingly negative light. They considered the protesters camped out in Kiev's central square terrorists, completely organized and financed by the United States and the European Union. They did not see the protesters as their fellow countrymen, and they supported then-President Viktor Yanukovich's use of the Berkut security forces to crack down on them. In fact, they were shocked by the Berkut's restraint, saying if it had been up to them, the protests would have been "cleaned up" from the outset. They added that while they usually looked forward to stopping over in Kiev during the long journey to the Baltics, this time they were ashamed of what was happening there and didn't even want to set foot in the city. They also predicted that the situation in Ukraine would worsen before it improved.

A few days later, the protests in Independence Square in fact reached [a crescendo of violence](#). The Berkut closed in on the demonstrators, and subsequent clashes between protesters and security forces throughout the week left dozens dead and hundreds injured. This spawned a sequence of events that led to [the overthrow of Yanukovich](#), [the formation of a new Ukrainian government](#) not recognized by Moscow and the subsequent [Russian military intervention in](#)

[Crimea](#). While the speed of these events astonished many foreign (especially Western) observers, to the men I met on the train, it was all but expected.

After all, the crisis didn't emerge from a vacuum. Ukraine was a polarized country well before the Euromaidan movement took shape. I have always been struck by how traveling to different parts of Ukraine feels like visiting different countries. Every country has its regional differences, to be sure. But Ukraine stands apart in this regard.

Ukraine's East-West Divide

Traveling in Lviv in the west, for example, is a starkly different experience than traveling in Donetsk in the east. The language spoken is different, with Ukrainian used in Lviv and Russian in Donetsk. The architecture is different, too, with classical European architecture lining narrow cobblestoned streets in Lviv and Soviet apartment blocs alongside sprawling boulevards predominating in Donetsk. Each region has different heroes: A large bust of Lenin surveys the main square in Donetsk, while Stepan Bandera, a World War II-era Ukrainian nationalist revolutionary, is honored in Lviv. Citizens of Lviv commonly view people from Donetsk as pro-Russian rubes while people in Donetsk constantly speak of nationalists/fascists in Lviv.

Lviv and Donetsk lie on [the extreme ends of the spectrum](#), but they are hardly alone. Views are even more polarized on the Crimean Peninsula, where ethnic Russians make up the majority and [which soon could cease to be part of Ukraine](#).

The east-west Ukrainian cultural divide is deep, and unsurprisingly it is reflected in the country's politics. Election results from the past 10 years show a clear dividing line between voting patterns in western and central Ukraine and those in the southern and eastern parts of the country. In the 2005 and 2010 presidential elections, Yanukovich received overwhelming support in the east and Crimea but only marginal support in the west. Ukraine does not have "swing states."

Such internal political and cultural divisions would be difficult to overcome under normal circumstances, but Ukraine's geographic and geopolitical position magnifies them exponentially. [Ukraine is the quintessential borderland country](#), eternally trapped between Europe to the west and Russia to the east. Given its strategic location in the middle of the Eurasian heartland, the country has constantly been -- and will constantly be -- an arena in which the West and Russia duel for influence.

Competition over Ukraine has had two primary effects on the country. The first is to further polarize Ukraine, splitting foreign policy preferences alongside existing cultural divisions. While many in western Ukraine seek closer ties with Europe, many in eastern Ukraine seek closer ties with Russia. While there are those who would avoid foreign entanglements altogether, both the European Union and Russia have made clear that neutrality is not an option. Outside competition in Ukraine has created wild and often destabilizing political swings, especially during the country's post-Soviet independence.

Therefore, the current crisis in Ukraine is only the latest manifestation of competition between the West and Russia. The European Union and the United States greatly influenced the 2004 Orange Revolution in terms of financing and political organization. Russia meanwhile greatly influenced the discrediting of the Orange Regime and the subsequent election of Yanukovich, who lost in the Orange Revolution, in 2010. The West pushed back once more by supporting the Euromaidan movement after Yanukovich abandoned key EU integration deals, and then Russia countered in Crimea, leading to the current impasse.

The tug of war between Russia and the West over Ukraine has gradually intensified over the past decade. This has hardened positions in Ukraine, culminating in the formation of armed groups representing rival political interests and leading to the violent standoff in Independence Square that quickly spread to other parts of the country.

The current government enjoys Western support, but Moscow and many in eastern and southern Ukraine deny its legitimacy, citing the manner in which it took power. This sets a dangerous precedent because it challenges the sitting government's and any future government's ability to claim any semblance of nationwide legitimacy.

It is clear that Ukraine cannot continue to function for long in its current form. A strong leader in such a polarized society will face major unrest, as Yanukovich's ouster shows. The lack of a national consensus will paralyze the government and prevent officials from forming coherent foreign policy, since any government that strikes a major deal with either Russia or the European Union will find it difficult to rightfully claim it speaks for the majority of the country. Now that Russia has used military moves in Crimea to show it will not let Ukraine go without a fight, the stage has been set for very difficult political negotiations over Ukraine's future.

Russian-Western Conflict Beyond Ukraine

A second, more worrying effect of the competition between the West and Russia over Ukraine extends beyond Ukrainian borders. As competition over the fate of Ukraine has escalated, it has also intensified Western-Russian competition elsewhere in the region.

Georgia and Moldova, two former Soviet countries that have sought stronger ties with the West, have accelerated their attempts to further integrate with the European Union -- and in Georgia's case, with NATO. On the other hand, countries such as Belarus and Armenia have sought to strengthen their economic and security ties with Russia. Countries already strongly integrated with the West like the Baltics are glad to see Western powers stand up to Russia, but meanwhile they know that they could be the next in line in the struggle between Russia and the West. Russia could hit them economically, and Moscow could also offer what it calls protection to their sizable Russian minorities as it did in Crimea. Russia already has hinted at this in discussions to extend Russian citizenship to [ethnic Russians and Russian speakers throughout the former Soviet Union](#).

The major question moving forward is how committed Russia and the West are to backing and reinforcing their positions in these rival blocs. Russia has made clear that it is willing to act militarily to defend its interests in Ukraine. Russia showed the same level of dedication to

preventing Georgia from turning to NATO in 2008. Moscow has made no secret that it is willing to use a mixture of economic pressure, energy manipulation and, if need be, military force [to prevent the countries on its periphery from leaving the Russian orbit](#). In the meantime, Russia will seek to [intensify integration efforts in its own blocs](#), including the Customs Union on the economic side and the Collective Security Treaty Organization on the military side.

So the big question is what the West intends. On several occasions, the European Union and United States have proved that they can play a major role in shaping events on the ground in Ukraine. Obtaining EU membership is a stated goal of the governments in Moldova and Georgia, and a significant number of people in Ukraine also support EU membership. But since it has yet to offer sufficient aid or actual membership, the European Union has not demonstrated as serious a commitment to the borderland countries as Russia has. It has refrained from doing so for several reasons, including [its own financial troubles and political divisions](#) and its dependence on energy and trade with Russia. While the European Union may yet show stronger resolve as a result of the current Ukrainian crisis, a major shift in the bloc's approach is unlikely -- at least not on its own.

On the Western side, then, U.S. intentions are key. In recent years, the United States has largely stayed on the sidelines in the competition over the Russian periphery. The United States was just as quiet as the European Union was in its reaction to the Russian invasion of Georgia, and calls leading up to the invasion for swiftly integrating Ukraine and Georgia into NATO went largely unanswered. Statements were made, but little was done.

But the global geopolitical climate has changed significantly since 2008. The United States is out of Iraq and is swiftly drawing down its forces in Afghanistan. Washington is now acting more indirectly in the Middle East, using a balance-of-power approach to pursue its interests in the region. This frees up its foreign policy attention, which is significant, given that the United States is the only party with the ability and resources to make a serious push in the Russian periphery.

As the Ukraine crisis moves into the diplomatic realm, a major test of U.S. willingness and ability to truly stand up to Russia is emerging. Certainly, Washington has been quite vocal during the current Ukrainian crisis and has shown signs of getting further involved elsewhere in the region, such as in Poland and the Baltic states. But concrete action from the United States with sufficient backing from the Europeans will be the true test of how committed the West is to standing up to Moscow. Maneuvering around Ukraine's deep divisions and Russian countermoves will be no easy task. But nothing short of concerted efforts by a united Western front will suffice to pull Ukraine and the rest of the borderlands toward the West.

Editor's Note: *Writing in George Friedman's stead this week is Stratfor Eurasia analyst Eugene Chausovsky.*

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