
It's All About Ukraine

Matthew Rojansky, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, August 2014

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If you tried to form an understanding of the current crisis in U.S.-Russia relations solely based on TV coverage, you would come away with the impression that the crisis basically began earlier this year when Russia invaded Ukraine, seized its territory, and started a war. You might further glean that Russia denies its real responsibility for the invasion, instead working through reckless and dangerous proxies who have done many despicable things, including shooting down a civilian airliner with almost 300 innocent people on board. In varying degrees, all of the foregoing is true, yet it omits one exceptionally important foundational detail—namely that this crisis has its origins in the dysfunction of Ukraine itself—a situation that is very far from resolution and that poses serious risks of deepening the conflict between Russia and the West in the near future.

The Ukrainian dimension of the story is essential for Americans to understand for two main reasons. First of all, it explains more than anything else the motivations of Mr. Putin for intervening in a neighboring country despite suffering great harm to Russia's regional and global standing, and of a large majority of Russians in supporting that intervention. Second, paying attention to what happens in Ukraine itself is key to forging an effective U.S. policy

response to the immediate crisis, managing the deterioration in U.S.-Russia ties to prevent irrevocable damage, and laying the foundations for future success.

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To understand why Putin and his fellow Russians feel compelled to intervene in Ukraine, you must understand that the crisis in that country began from the deep anger of all strata of Ukrainian society toward the corrupt, incompetent, and increasingly authoritarian regime of former President Viktor Yanukovich . Yanukovich, who had been elected in 2010 in a contest seen as free and fair by the international community, including the U.S., basically stole anything he could get his hands on in Ukraine, such that after four years of his misrule, economic growth and investment were obliterated, standards of living for ordinary Ukrainians were among the lowest in Europe, and the public lacked any confidence whatsoever in the country's courts, police, ministries, and all other governing institutions. Yanukovich's predecessors had hardly done better—each one was dogged by corruption scandals and appeared over matched by Ukraine's vast problems—but Yanukovich added fuel to his own fire by consistently lying to the Ukrainian people.

Yanukovich's biggest lie by far was his promise to deliver Ukraine into an Association Agreement with the European Union—not exactly EU membership, but a consolation prize that most Ukrainians thought would lead to major reform, economic opportunity, and rising standards of living. When in November 2013 Yanukovich made clear he did not intend to fulfill that promise, Ukrainians exploded onto the Maidan (Kiev's central square) in protest, and when that movement was met by the authorities with new repressive laws and

bloody violence, the protestors transformed into revolutionaries determined to remove Yanukovich from power. By the end of February 2014, Yanukovich fled the country, leaving opposition politicians to pick up the pieces, which included Yanukovich's broken promise to pursue integration with the West.

From Putin's perspective, Yanukovich's failure to hold it together in Ukraine created an existential crisis for his own government in Russia. Superficial similarities aside (both were duly elected authoritarian-leaning leaders of East Slavic former Soviet states), Putin and Yanukovich could hardly have been more different and could hardly have disliked one another more. Yet if by violently deposing their president, Ukrainians managed to bring change that would improve their standard of living while shifting their country's geopolitical orientation toward the West, the implicit message to Russians would be deeply dangerous for Putin and his own "power vertical." In fact, Putin was already convinced since at least 2011 that the West—mainly the U.S.—was behind "color revolutions" in Georgia (2002), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005), and that Russia was next on the list.

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Of course, regime preservation is not the most compelling argument for the majority of Russians to support intervention in Ukraine. For them, it is a potent combination of empathy for the perceived suffering of Russian speakers in Ukraine (underscored by relentless slanted coverage on Russian TV), resurgent nationalism cultivated by skilled Kremlin-backed propagandists, and deep anger that the West continues to expand its sphere of influence around Russia through deceit and disrespect. Ironically, a half century of Cold War enmity followed by a quarter century of American triumphalism and indifference to their concerns has primed even ordinary Russians to accept their own government's manipulation of events in Ukraine, while dismissing the West's

stated support for Ukrainians' sovereignty and security as mere artifice.

This brings us to how important an understanding of the situation in Ukraine is to forging a more effective U.S. policy response. U.S. policy priorities can be thought of in short, medium and long term dimensions. In the short term, there is an urgent need to de-escalate the violence in southeastern Ukraine and prevent further deterioration of the political and security situation in the country as a whole. Here it is important to recognize that even though Yanukovich has fled, and Ukrainians voted in a new president in May, the revolution is far from over. The very center of Kiev is still an armed encampment, with soot-faced “self-defense” units manning roadblocks on all the major thoroughfares, and heavily armed, camo-clad volunteers surrounding key government buildings. Most of these Maidan veterans are without jobs and many are far from their homes in other parts of Ukraine. Together with the volunteer paramilitary units now fighting alongside the regular army in the southeast, they represent the “hard place” against which the fledgling Ukrainian government may be smashed at any time by the “rock” of Russian aggression.

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In the middle term, as the United States and Europe develop and implement a sanctions strategy designed to pressure the Russian leadership into changing course, they should be certain about the goal of the sanctions being contemplated. If it is to force a Russian defeat in southeast Ukraine, then it will probably backfire simply because an outright defeat would be unacceptable to Mr. Putin, as it would exacerbate precisely the catastrophic, regime-ending precedent he fears most. If on the other hand the goal is to compel Russia to help resolve the conflict through negotiation and compromise, as U.S. officials have stated, then it is essential to ensure that both the willingness and the capacity to agree to and implement such a compromise exists on the Russian as well as the Ukrainian side—which suggests the urgent need for dialogue in addition to threats and warnings. Western policymakers should also consider whether the effect of “isolating the Russian economy” through sanctions might be to underscore most Russians’ confidence in the Kremlin’s paranoid anti-Western propaganda rather than weaken it. Even if it has decided to shelve the political relationship, Washington should tread carefully to avoid damaging the handful of vital institutions that underpin U.S.-Russia economic, scientific, cultural, intellectual, and social engagement, as these will be essential to weathering this crisis and restoring productive partnership in the future.

Finally, distinct from merely checking Russian moves in Ukraine, Ukraine’s successful post-revolutionary development over the long term should be a strategic priority for the United States, since that success will strengthen U.S. power and influence and help secure U.S. interests in the region and beyond. To ensure that outcome will take a level of U.S. engagement with Ukraine that has been apparent only in fits and starts over the past quarter century. Engagement in this context must entail both a willingness to help Ukrainians afford the high costs of modernizing their defunct economy and brittle infrastructure, and tough conditionality to prevent a repetition of the old post-

Soviet story in which elites siphon off international assistance funds until the accounts run dry and the donors depart exasperated and exhausted.

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Long term success will also demand deeper and more sustained attention to Russia and the region as a whole. Americans can hardly hope to exert influence, exploit opportunities or respond to threats effectively without a sophisticated awareness of the fundamental factors at work in the region—which is not provided by news coverage. Rather than cutting U.S. government investment in regional scholarship and exchanges (the Title 8, Title 6, and Open World programs have all been slashed over the past few years), how about announcing investments at least commensurate with the tens of millions the U.S. has promised to spend on body armor and night vision goggles for the Ukrainian army?

One of America's great strengths is that we are problem solvers, and the age of television has conditioned us to speak in sound bites and expect solutions before the commercial break. Yet experience has and will remind us that in foreign policy, there are no easy answers, just as TV's well-worn plot lines and convenient caricatures are seldom accurate in the real world. We can begin by recognizing that the current crisis is not just about Russia and the West, but about Ukraine—where tragic drama, heroic ambition, and even the occasional moment of comedy deserve our full attention.

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