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# RUSSIA'S UKRAINE OBSESSION

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The world's liberal democracies—and indeed the global community as a whole—were unprepared for the geopolitical and civilizational challenges triggered by Ukraine's efforts to affirm its sovereignty and build a more transparent, democratic state. The only way Ukraine could achieve this goal was by pivoting to the West. And such a pivot was bound to lead to a confrontation between the West and Moscow, which still views Ukraine as a star in the Russian galaxy. This constellation of circumstances resulted in a threefold test: of Russia's ability to shift away from its imperial paradigm; of the West's readiness to abide by its own professed standards; and of Ukraine's capacity to carry out a systemic transformation. Moscow's continuing attempts to undermine the Ukrainian state, the rise of "Ukraine fatigue" in the West, and the Ukrainian elite's sloppiness in pursuing reforms all prove that the civilizational challenges posed by Ukraine have not been met.

Today Ukraine has become not just the key issue in Russian political discourse, but an all-consuming topic. Moscow has grown so obsessed with Ukraine that it has made the "Ukrainian question" integral to Russian identity, even as Ukraine tries desperately to escape Moscow's embrace. This strange development demonstrates Russia's existential complexes. First, lacking any other ideas to use as a basis for consolidating Russian society, Moscow has settled on antagonism to Ukraine: The Kremlin aims to unite the Russian public around hostility toward an enemy and a quest to avenge the humiliation of being abandoned by a "little brother" (as many Russians have historically viewed Ukraine). Afraid to confront its archenemy, the United States, the Russian elite has resorted to picking a fight with Ukraine as a proxy for Washington. Second, Russian authorities have made attitudes toward Ukraine a

litmus test for loyalty and patriotism. Third, the relentless focus of the media and the elite on chaos (real and alleged) in Ukraine distracts Russians from their domestic woes. It also supplies the Russian public with “evidence” that staging a Russian Mайдan (the term is drawn from the central Kyiv square that was the main site of Ukraine’s revolutionary protest movements in 2004 and again in 2013–14) would have disastrous consequences.

As Ukraine has moved decisively away from Russia’s sphere of influence, the Russian elite has found itself suffering from a “phantom pain,” like someone who has lost an arm or a leg but continues to feel pain from a body part that is no longer there. Ukraine has always occupied a special place in Russia’s consciousness. There are a number of reasons for this, ranging from the historical interconnectedness of the two peoples to mutual economic interests. But the far more salient point here is that Russia’s political class refuses to treat Ukraine as a separate nation with the right to independent statehood. Ukraine’s assertion of its independence not only delivers a crushing blow to Russia’s great-power ego but also leaves Russia without Kievan Rus, its historical birthplace and the cradle of Russian Orthodoxy. To process this change, Russia must rewrite its own national historical narrative. Ukraine’s departure from the Russian fold also poses a challenge to the Eurasian Union, Russia’s project for the integration of neighboring countries under Moscow’s leadership. Without Russia’s “younger brother,” this “family” of post-Soviet nations would clearly be incomplete.

For more than twenty years, Moscow has repeatedly acted with paternalism and condescension toward Ukraine, treating it as an ersatz state. Under Putin’s rule, Moscow has initiated several “gas wars” against its neighbor (in 2006, 2008, and 2009), temporarily cutting off or reducing supplies in an attempt to strengthen Russia’s hold over Ukrainian decision makers. In the 2004 presidential contest, which culminated in the Orange Revolution when Ukrainians took to the streets to challenge election fraud favoring pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich, Moscow intervened by supporting Yanukovich. It was at this time that Ukraine became Vladimir Putin’s personal project.

### **The Kremlin’s Survival Strategy**

After mass protests took place in Russia in 2011–12, sparked by a combination of rigged parliamentary elections and Putin’s announcement that he would return to the presidency after a stint as prime minister, the Kremlin had shifted toward heightened repression at home and a foreign policy driven by hostility to the West. This orientation made Russia’s harsh reaction to the Ukrainian revolution of 2013–14 inevitable. In February 2014, Yanukovich (who lost a rerun of the 2004 presidential contest but won the following election in 2010) fled Ukraine following several months

of continuous mass protests against his corruption, authoritarian tactics, and last-minute reversal on the signing of an EU Association Agreement. Shortly afterward, Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and sent troops and arms into Ukraine's eastern Donbas region, where two enclaves are now under the control of pro-Russian separatists. Five years later, low-level fighting in the region still continues.

Moscow's aggression toward Ukraine reflects its return to a survival formula based on the idea of Russia's uniqueness, a formula that involves both insulating Russia from liberal influence and forcing the West to recognize the Kremlin's right to interpret the global rules of the game. The Kremlin's actions in and propaganda about Ukraine have been aimed, in part, at stamping out the very idea of European values in Russia and justifying the pivot to a "besieged fortress" model.

Destabilizing Ukraine is Moscow's means not only of shoring up its geopolitical influence, but also of eliminating the very idea of the Maidan as an alternative to the Russian matrix (meaning Russia's system of personalized power). In the Kremlin's view, the Maidan is an absolute evil that must be eradicated. The Kremlin's Ukrainian campaign is thus a preemptive strategy with the ultimate goal of forestalling any threats to one-man rule both in Russia and in other post-Soviet countries outside the EU umbrella.

The flagrant attacks to which the Kremlin has subjected Ukraine also have psychological underpinnings: One might surmise that they come from a desire to humiliate Ukrainians, as well as to punish and terrify them—*pour encourager les autres*, including Russians. The Kremlin has seized this opportunity to teach the rebellious Ukrainians a lesson, and to warn Russians about the price of showing insubordination or attempting to escape the Russian matrix. And there is yet another audience: Russia is warning the West, "Do not meddle—this is our playground!" Moscow sees the conflict in Ukraine as one more test of the West's readiness to bow to the Kremlin's demands (such a test has already been conducted once before, in Georgia).

It is ironic that Western leaders have been looking for ways to enable Putin to "save face" and voluntarily "de-escalate" the crisis. Finding an escape hatch is in reality the last thing on his mind. The Kremlin is looking for ways to force the West to accept its approach to dealing with the world. The West is treating the current relative lull in hostilities in Ukraine as a pause, perhaps even a prelude to a Russian retreat. In fact, it is a new stage in the offensive. For the Kremlin, retreat would mean defeat—and since the Putin regime has staked its political survival on demonizing and destabilizing Ukraine, defeat would be tantamount to suicide.

Ukraine has thus become a battleground on which the Kremlin can wage its struggle against Western civilization. To survive within the anti-Western paradigm that the current regime has chosen, the Kremlin must constantly seek excuses for its aggressive behavior. Ukraine is a

convenient excuse: The conflict there is a tangible incarnation of the war against what Russia sees as the global evil of “color revolutions,” as well as a pretext for manufacturing militaristic fervor and a warlike atmosphere at home.

Losing Ukraine would be more than just a personal failure for Putin: It would represent the most painful blow to the Russian system since the collapse of the Soviet Union, leaving the Kremlin without a buffer state to shield Russians from Western influence. A successful transformation of Ukraine would present Russians with a dangerous model for emulation. Thus, Moscow cannot afford to allow Ukraine to be a successful, independent state.

True, Russians have grown weary of the confrontation with Ukraine. As of February 2019, about 82 percent of Russians reportedly viewed Ukrainians “positively.”<sup>1</sup> But the Russian political regime cannot risk allowing Ukraine to swim on its own. The ghost of the Maidan continues to haunt the Kremlin. Protests in Moscow in mid-2019, triggered by the exclusion of opposition candidates from city elections, and growing restlessness in the regions have given the Kremlin a warning that a Russian political awakening could be approaching. These developments only reinforce the regime’s conviction that Ukraine must be reined in so as to show that any movement for freedom is fated to be crushed.

## The West’s Response

The West was not prepared for the battle with Russia over Ukraine. When Crimea was annexed and the Donbas campaign kicked off in early 2014, Western experts and influential public figures began searching for a solution that would satisfy Moscow. Former U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger (1973–77) has been especially vocal in trying to convince the West that Ukraine can never be “just another foreign country” (*vis-à-vis* Russia, of course). Kissinger’s mantra involves making Ukraine “a bridge” between Europe and Russia: “If Ukraine is to survive and thrive, it must not be each side’s outpost against the other—it should function as a bridge between them.”<sup>2</sup> Former French president Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (1974–81) similarly argued that Ukraine must be turned into a “confederation” that would serve as “the link” between Russia and Europe.<sup>3</sup> Former German chancellor Helmut Schmidt (1974–82) called Putin’s actions in Crimea “quite understandable” and the ensuing Western sanctions against Russia “stupid.”<sup>4</sup>

Some Western experts have argued that the war in the Donbas “increasingly resembles a low-grade civil war” and is “far more complex than a mere Russian ploy.”<sup>5</sup> Others insisted that “the EU . . . precipitated matters by blundering into the most sensitive part of Russia’s backyard.”<sup>6</sup> Some even suggested that the West needed to help Russia to “reestablish [its] status as a great power,” after which Putin would

stop “trying to dominate and intimidate his neighbors.”<sup>7</sup> All these ideas fit within the concept of Ukraine’s “Finlandization,” in which Ukraine would become “a neutral country, between East and West, where Russia’s historical interests are recognized.”<sup>8</sup>

In the early months of fighting, U.S. and Russian experts who had gathered under the sponsorship of the Finnish government, a U.S. foundation, and a Russian research institute—but without Ukrainian participation—proffered their own plan for ending the conflict, entitled the Boisto Agenda. This plan drew criticism from a longer list of Ukrainian, Western, and Russian experts and public figures, who wrote in their collective response: “Such a decision reinforces the worst instincts that prevail in Russia—and possibly even among some Americans—that Ukraine is not a truly independent country and that Russia can, with U.S. endorsement, determine its fate. That nobody from Ukraine was invited to participate disqualifies this initiative from any serious consideration.”<sup>9</sup>

The various proposals that have been put forward for the Finlandization of Ukraine would essentially entail Ukraine’s return to Russian domination. Despite pressure from the backers of such plans, however, the West has (albeit sometimes reluctantly) supported Ukraine’s freedom to choose its own path. In the end, leaving Ukraine in the cold would have been a deeply embarrassing defeat for the liberal democracies. True, the Minsk accords of September 2014 and February 2015, brokered by Berlin and Paris to end the war between Russia and Ukraine, were hardly a surefire recipe for success.<sup>10</sup> First, the Russian aggressor was accepted as a peacemaker and a broker. Second, the Western mediators allowed Moscow to use stopping the war as a pretext for furthering its efforts to modify Ukrainian statehood: Discussing questions of Ukraine’s internal structure with Russia at the table effectively legitimized this meddling. Third, the West assumed that sanctions plus diplomacy would eventually lead to a political solution and restore the European security status quo (this proved to be an illusion).

The Minsk accords were an attempt to reach a compromise between incompatible interests: Ukraine’s desire to move toward Europe, and the Kremlin’s desire to keep Ukraine in its embrace. Ukraine lacked the resources to defend its choice, and the West lacked the willingness to help Ukraine without making far-reaching concessions to the Kremlin.

Since the beginning of the conflict in 2014, Western leaders have been looking for a peaceful solution, confident of their powers of persuasion, in reason, in the mechanism of give-and-take, and in the parties’ desire to find a “win-win” solution. The Kremlin, meanwhile, has had other goals in mind: It is hoping for a deal that will not only help it to preserve its gains and to control Ukraine, but will also force the West to endorse Russia’s understanding of the European and global order.

To be sure, Western governments have offered some support for Ukrainian sovereignty in the form of targeted sanctions against Russia,

meant to deter further aggression. The EU has stepped up its assistance to Ukraine, ratifying the Association Agreement that had figured centrally in the EuroMaidan protests, launching the free-trade area promised by that agreement, and introducing a visa-free regime for Ukrainians traveling to EU countries.<sup>11</sup>

But transforming Ukraine in a time of war has turned out to be a more complicated project than originally anticipated. “Ukraine fatigue” has begun to undermine the West’s resolve, and so Western governments are looking for “compromise” solutions, which include the idea of “sharing responsibility” for Ukraine with Russia. Russia’s determination to make Ukraine ungovernable often seems stronger than Europe’s commitment to helping Ukraine to move forward along its chosen pro-European trajectory. Moscow has been successfully imposing its terms by escalating tensions in eastern Ukraine, hoping (with good reason) that policy makers not only in Kyiv but also in the West would lose their nerve and back down. The Kremlin has demonstrated an aptitude for pressuring the liberal democracies by raising the stakes, bluffing, and seizing tactical advantages.

For Europeans, establishing institutions such as NATO and the EU represented a remedy for the problems that had plagued the continent over the course of the blood-soaked twentieth century. These mechanisms were expected to prevent future wars in Europe. Events in Ukraine since 2014, however, have exposed fundamental flaws in the European order. First, the West does not know how to deal with conflicts that blur the lines between war and peace: Russia and Ukraine maintain diplomatic relations and cooperate on economic matters, yet these countries are at war with each other. Second, while Western policy makers understand that the Kremlin’s actions in Ukraine are an attempt at containing the West, they do not know how to respond, since they fear that pushing back would only isolate Russia and provoke its predatory instincts. Instead, the West is seeking to de-escalate tensions with Russia, showing that it is not ready to stand up for Ukraine’s sovereignty if the price is risking an outright confrontation with Moscow.

## Ukraine’s Journey to Europe

Ukraine continues to matter for both geopolitical and normative reasons. If Ukraine grows unstable or politically frail, the Kremlin will redouble its efforts to bring the country back into Russia’s “sphere of influence,” thus undermining European stability. The failure of the project to reform Ukraine’s institutions and defend Ukrainian sovereignty would be a “humiliating admission of impotence and constitute a surrender of Western values.”<sup>12</sup> Ukraine’s successful transformation, on the other hand, would demonstrate that a society that has experienced the same history of Sovietization as Russia is capable of overcoming this legacy and becoming a rule-of-law state.

Ukraine has not succumbed to Russian aggression. It has made notable progress in achieving macroeconomic stability, improving public-sector transparency, and reforming its energy and banking sectors. It has signed the EU Association Agreement, making it clear that Ukraine sees itself as a “European” country. Ukrainians have also made efforts to challenge an entrenched post-Soviet culture of corruption and rent-seeking.

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By coming out in great numbers to the Maidan in 2004 and in 2013–14, Ukrainians proved that they are ready to move toward an open society. In June 2019, 60.5 percent of Ukrainians “believed in the success of reforms in Ukraine,” and about 45 percent of Ukrainians were ready

to endure financial difficulties for the sake of freedoms and civil rights (28 percent were prepared to “exchange” freedom and civil rights for material well-being).<sup>13</sup>

Presidential and parliamentary elections in Ukraine in 2019 have demonstrated that Ukrainians are tired of the unfulfilled promises of the ruling elite and its inability to guarantee justice and the rule of law. Ukrainians are also tired of war. Incumbents had a strikingly poor year: President Petro Poroshenko lost his reelection bid to political outsider Volodymyr Zelensky—a comic actor—by a staggering margin of 73 to 24 percent in April, and Zelensky’s new party won a sweeping victory in parliamentary elections in July. Yet the majority of Ukrainians continue to support their country’s sovereignty and its European vector, voting for political forces (including Zelensky’s party) that have pledged themselves to this reform agenda.

Ukrainians are ready to make compromises with Russia in order to end the war—but not at any price. About 66 percent of Ukrainians oppose holding local elections in the separatist-controlled regions of the Donbas on terms set by the separatists; 62 percent are against offering a blanket amnesty for those who fought against Ukraine; and 58 percent are against creating local judicial and law-enforcement institutions in the occupied regions consisting only of “local representatives.” A mere 12 percent support autonomy for the separatist-controlled territories.<sup>14</sup> This means that Ukrainians are firmly against peace on Russia’s terms.

At the same time, Ukraine’s pivot to Europe has proved to be an agonizing ordeal. Ukraine is juggling several difficult tasks: strengthening state sovereignty, ending the war with Russia, and transforming a corrupt oligarchic system. From the beginning, Ukraine has faced struc-



tural obstacles to progress along its chosen path. In order to consolidate its national identity after achieving independence in 1991, Ukraine had to extract itself from the “imperial body” that once subsumed it. This process of detachment from Russia has been extremely painful. For Ukraine, cultivating a shared sense of national identity meant writing and rewriting the nation’s history, as well as rejecting many of the mental habits and characteristics it had shared with Russia. All this was bound to provoke an aggressive response from Moscow.

Moreover, given the seven decades that most of the country spent under Soviet rule, Ukraine faces a more difficult task than the one that confronted the Baltic states and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe when they carried out democratic reforms in the 1990s. Ukraine has had to disentangle the political knot that has resulted from the merging of property and power, as well as to dismantle the powerful and clannish corporate networks that have deformed the workings of the state. These networks corrupted the ruling class and discredited key institutions, including the legislature, the judicial system, and the media. The state needs a total cleansing, but who will do that if there is no one in the ruling elite who is free of connections to the rotten system? Zelensky’s administration faces dramatic challenges. His “Servant of the People” party, composed of political newcomers, lacks experience, and his team may have its own ties to oligarchs. Nonetheless, Ukrainians have given this team a historic chance to push forward the country’s stalled political transformation.

Another complication is Europe’s inability to integrate Ukraine in the way it previously integrated other postcommunist countries, with the EU acting as the guarantor of those states’ successful transformations. Uncertainty regarding the EU’s own future and the crisis of the old liberal model have created an environment that is hardly conducive to Ukraine’s efforts to build a rule-of-law state. The surest way of bolstering Ukraine’s reform efforts would be for EU leaders to reassure Kyiv that the path to membership remains open, provided Ukraine satisfies EU requirements. Europe, however, has shied away from any such commitment. Ukraine also needs international guarantees of its territorial integrity, which the West has failed to offer.

Ukrainian voters’ overwhelming support for President Zelensky and his party in the July 2019 parliamentary elections—“Servant of the People” now commands the first single-party legislative majority in Ukraine’s postcommunist history—has given the new president a unique chance to pursue reforms and strengthen the sovereignty of the Ukrainian state.<sup>15</sup>

On 1 October 2019, President Zelensky announced that Ukraine was agreeing to the “Steinmeier formula” as a means of kick-starting the peace process. According to this plan, proposed in 2016 by then–Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier of Germany, Ukraine would hold OSCE-supervised elections in the separatist “republics” and grant

them “special status” after the vote. Zelensky’s announcement was met in Ukraine with harsh criticism and accusations of capitulation. The new president argued that Ukraine had committed to holding local elections in the occupied Donbas only under specific conditions: The elections would take place only following the departure of Russian forces and the restoration of Ukrainian control over the border with Russia, and they would be held according to Ukrainian law. But it was not clear how he planned to achieve these preconditions. Given the ambiguity of the “formula,” there is likely to be continuing disagreement about what exactly Zelensky’s decision means—particularly in terms of the order in which each side must fulfill its obligations.<sup>16</sup> The Kremlin was not ready to give ground, and it looked as if Paris, Berlin, and Washington were ready to press Zelensky to accept an option favorable to Moscow.

Ukraine still has a tough journey ahead. The issue of war and peace is still very much on the agenda. Formidable domestic barriers to reform remain, and Ukrainian elites so far have failed to demonstrate the political will and determination needed to demolish oligarchic and other corrupt networks.

If the Ukrainian revolution grinds to a halt, its breakdown will be due not only to the Ukrainian elite’s inability to think strategically, but also to the West’s failure to support Ukraine’s pro-European trajectory. Will the West have sufficient political will to protect Ukraine from the Kremlin’s advances and to offer positive incentives for Ukraine’s transformation? We will soon know the answer.

## NOTES

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9. The plan can be found at Uri Friedman, "A 24-Step Plan to Resolve the Ukraine Crisis," *Atlantic*, 26 August 2014, [www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/a-24-step-plan-to-resolve-the-ukraine-crisis/379121/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/a-24-step-plan-to-resolve-the-ukraine-crisis/379121/); the response is at Friedman, "A Ukraine Peace Plan That Excludes Ukrainians Is Unacceptable," *Atlantic*, 1 September 2014, [www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/09/response-boisto-peace-plan-ukraine-russia-us/379428](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/09/response-boisto-peace-plan-ukraine-russia-us/379428).

10. The Minsk agreements were based on a tradeoff: On one side of the exchange are Moscow's promises of a ceasefire, the withdrawal of troops, weaponry, and equipment, and restoration of Ukrainian control over the border. On the other side is Kyiv's acceptance of Russian influence over plans for a constitutional restructuring of the Ukrainian state, entailing integration of the separatist enclaves into the Ukrainian state as entities with "special status."

11. Timothy Ash et al., *The Struggle for Ukraine* (London: Chatham House, 2017), [www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-10-18-struggle-for-ukraine-ash-gunn-lough-lutsevych-nixey-sherr-wolczuk.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-10-18-struggle-for-ukraine-ash-gunn-lough-lutsevych-nixey-sherr-wolczuk.pdf).

12. Ash et al., *Struggle for Ukraine*, 2.

13. Most likely to be willing to endure hardships for the sake of reforms are voters who supported Servant of the People (73 percent), rock star Sviatoslav Vakarchuk's reformist party Voice (71 percent), and former president Petro Poroshenko's European Solidarity (68 percent). Least willing to accept suffering for reforms are the supporters of the pro-Kremlin Opposition Platform—For Life (42 percent among this group are willing to tolerate economic difficulties on the road to reform, while 51 percent are not). See "Reforms in Ukraine: Public Opinion," Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 15 July 2019, [https://dif.org.ua/en/article/Reforms%20in%20Ukraine:%20public%20opinion\\_2](https://dif.org.ua/en/article/Reforms%20in%20Ukraine:%20public%20opinion_2).

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15. About 61.5 per cent of Ukrainians place their hopes in President Zelensky as a prospective "driving force" for reform. See "Reforms in Ukraine: Public Opinion." As Anders Åslund notes, "The landslide victory of Servant of the People on July 21 offers great opportunities for reform in Ukraine, but such windows rarely last long." See Åslund, "A Unique Chance for Change," 23 July 2019, [www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/a-unique-chance-for-change](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/a-unique-chance-for-change).

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