

The Ukrainian Crisis

War-torn Ukraine: Ukrainian/Russian fallout post Soviet era

Since the dismantlement of the Soviet Union in 1991, all former Soviet territories that had been annexed since 1922 were reinstated as sovereign countries. The western and southern parts of the U.S.S.R. (at its height comprising $\frac{1}{8}$ of the world's area) became Balkanized. Post-Soviet states such as Estonia, Latvia, Belarus, Lithuania, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan seceded from the Russian Federation by tribal demography, all except one state—Ukraine.

A prolonged crisis in Ukraine erupted on 21 November, 2013 following the decision by then-President Viktor Yanukovich to suspend preparations for the implementation of an association agreement with the European Union. This decision resulted in mass protests by its opponents, known as the "Euromaidan" (so named after pro-European demonstrators rallying in Maidan Square, Kiev). This crisis has its roots sown as far back as 2004, when emotions ran high and dissent was widespread during an election.

The Ukrainian presidential elections of 2004 saw off two contenders vying for power: Viktor Yanukovich, the then-Prime Minister of Ukraine and the former Governor of Donetsk, and, Viktor Yushchenko, the former Prime Minister of Ukraine and head of the National Bank of Ukraine. Yanukovich was hand-picked by the sitting President, Leonid Kuchma. He had spent time in jail on rape charges and was accused of having mafia ties. His popularity was mainly in the Russian speaking regions of eastern and southern Ukraine. He only spoke Russian and was mistrusted by his adversaries who considered him to be a Russian stooge. In contrast to Yanukovich, Yushchenko had western ideals. His popularity grew increasingly as his progressive platform brought hope and change to the country. In September of 2004, he was poisoned with dioxin whilst eating dinner with secret service agents. The toxic substance that Yushchenko ingested left him permanently disfigured. Yushchenko was undeterred by the attempt on his life, as were his supporters who drew more inspiration from their leader's brush with martyrdom. The chain of events ignited a massive wave of street demonstrations, with growing calls to sever ties with Russia and ally with Europe, dubbed the "Orange Revolution"—so coined after Yushchenko's orange political campaign colour.

Discernibly, the elections spanning 2004 onwards had been about much more than the mundane day-to-day political affairs, like the economy, education or healthcare. What was at stake was what course Ukraine would take, i.e. keep its relationship intact with Russia, or, alter its make-up and integrate into a federated Europe. Ukraine stood at a pernicious crossroads. The ardour of the Orange Revolution signalled changing times.

Viktor Yushchenko was declared the victor of the rerun presidential elections, held on 26 December, 2004, after the Ukrainian Supreme Court annulled the official results of the rigged elections, held on 21 November, 2004. He was sworn into office on the 23rd of January, 2005. Yushchenko's popularity whilst in office dipped drastically over the course of his presidency. He stood again for the 2010 elections, but, he didn't make it past the first round. Viktor Yanukovich, his opponent of the 2004 elections, took the spoils and was sworn in on the 25th of February, 2010. The tide had turned, for now.

The citizens who identify themselves as Ukrainian by virtue of their ethnic grouping and allegiance were easy prey for the nationalist camp, which could rally supporters with little effort and homogenise thought by appealing to the basic tribal instincts of its audience through the use of appropriate psychological techniques e.g. speech, body language, rhetoric, paraphernalia [flags, anthems, slogans, banners, colours, et cetera]. The citizens who speak little Ukrainian, or no Ukrainian at all, and, who maintain an affinity with Russia are thought to consider themselves as just ordinary citizens with identical civic rights under the law, but, without the same attributes as the former.



Under Yanukovich's reign, in 2010, the balance of power shifted from the nationalist camp to the pro-Russian camp, but, this lasted for just four years. Mired in corruption, he was deposed by parliament on 22 February, 2014. During this time, violent clashes between protesters and special police forces led to many civilian deaths and injuries. The Orange Revolution of a decade previously was largely peaceful, in spite of threats made to protesters. This one was bloody and began Ukraine's path to civil war. Russia quickly seized the opportunity to annex the strategic Crimean peninsula; a move hotly condemned by the international community.

The Russian perspective concerning its annexation of Crimea differs from the rest of the world insofar that it upholds a retrospective, irredentist claim to the territory. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, Crimea became a republic within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. It was downgraded decades later to the Crimean Oblast in World War Two, and, in 1954, the Crimean Oblast was transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. By an internal political action, in 1954 by Communist Party General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev, Crimea became a part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic within the Soviet Union, and, on 24 August, 1991, when Ukraine became sovereign, Crimea became the Autonomous Republic of Crimea within newly independent Ukraine. According to the 2001 census report, the inhabitants of Crimea are predominantly Russian, standing at 58.5% against just 24.4% Ukrainian ethnicity.

On 16 March, 2014, a referendum in Crimea was held that purported to show majority support for joining Russia. The 96.77% voting results in favour of secession drew the ire from the international community, which lambasted the Russian establishment for allegedly rigging the referendum. In a show of defiance, Russian President Vladimir Putin dismissed the accusations as premeditated anti-Russian bias and signed into law a treaty of accession, absorbing the self-declared independent Republic of Crimea into the Russian Federation. This annexation is not recognized by Ukraine, nor is the rest of the world recognizing it, with the exception of some Russian-allied countries.

Henceforth, pro-Russian insurgents comprised of Ukrainian citizens from the eastern side, and possibly Russian citizens as well, have fought off the Ukrainian military for control over the Russian speaking regions. Russia is suspected of having assisted the insurgency in some capacity. A civil war has erupted in Ukraine because its citizenry was not coexisting as one cohesive nation. These tensions did not ferment overnight; when Ukraine was occupied by Nazi Germany, a large number of Ukrainians chose to cooperate with the Nazis, for reasons of resurgent Ukrainian nationalism, aspirations for regaining independence from the Soviet Union, widespread anger and resentment against the Russians over the Holodomor (a disastrous man-made famine in 1933 that claimed millions of lives in Ukraine), which occurred only a few years before, as well as rampant racism towards other ethnic groups (Jews, Romany, Tatars, Poles).

Another contributory factor for the war was Ukraine's growing relationship with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); an organization which Russia treats with disdain because it perceives NATO as a means of counterbalance to Russia's regional influence. When Yanukovych was deposed, in February of 2014, the interim Arseniy Yatsenyuk government initially said that it had no plans to alter its non-aligned status to join NATO. However, when tensions between Ukraine and Russia reached boiling point in October of 2014, the new Ukrainian government made NATO a top priority. Certain NATO member states may have nuclear weapons sharing agreements with the United States, whereby NATO member states may store and deploy nuclear weapons. When put together, all these external factors comprising both the European Union and NATO have led to cataclysmic results vis-à-vis Ukraine/Russia. Instead of attenuating aggression, the Occident has exacerbated tension, spurring Ukraine into an adventure that was always a lost cause. Russia's military might is tenfold that of Ukraine; it has far more troops and better equipment. The flare-up in Crimea is not without precedent either. In 2008, Georgia got itself embroiled in a skirmish with Russia that descended into full scale war, dubbed the Russo-Georgian War. This conflict was triggered when Georgia received a NATO Membership Action Plan; a prospectus for accession to the organization. Russia responded with military incursions on Georgian soil. The war led to South Ossetia seceding from Georgia and declaring its independence, now partially recognized as the de facto Republic of South Ossetia; a shift analogous with Crimea. Moments after Viktor Yanukovych fled Ukraine in February of 2014, the international community ushered in sanctions in a bid to convince Russia to retreat its troops from Crimea, prompting Russia in return to respond with retaliatory sanctions by restricting food imports from the European Union, Norway, United States, Canada and Australia. The sanctions imposed on Russia have borne little. Its financial sector has suffered a decline; however, this will unlikely suffice to cripple Russia into changing its course. Russia's sovereignty is supreme. It is a country bestowed with most of the fossil fuels and minerals that it requires, and has abundant food sources to feed its population. An intermediary, like China, could otherwise export any shortfall to Russia at a premium.