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Is Ukraine crisis just part of a broader Russian strategy?

At the GLOBSEC security conference in Europe, participants confronted a stark assessment that Russia is excelling at creating divides between Western powers over the crisis.

By Nicholas Blanford

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The crisis in Ukraine ranges far beyond the confines of eastern Europe to represent a critical challenge to the world order – and to the durability of the European Union, attendants at an international security conference in this city were told Wednesday.

The conflict in Ukraine is a “test case” for the EU's 28 members, given the emergence of a Russia-inspired “countervision.”

“Europeans are used to thinking, 'we only have one vision, we are innocent, and everyone likes us,’” says Timothy Snyder, a fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna and a specialist on Central and Eastern Europe. “But since the middle of 2013 there has been a countervision under the name of Eurasia.”

The economic union grouping of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan is intended to form the basis of a future entity that could act as a bulwark against the perception of Western encroachment on Russia's sphere of influence. President Vladimir Putin had pressed for Ukraine's inclusion in the Eurasian Economic Union before demonstrations in Kiev earlier this year forced then-President Viktor Yanukovich to flee the country.

The Eurasian Economic Union “pretends to be a trade agreement but in fact it is a cultural, ideological, and political challenge whose ultimate aim is to fragment and destroy the European Union and leave the European Union as a bunch of nation states that ... can be easily manipulated by Russia,” Mr. Snyder says.

That stark analysis came as a new round of talks commenced in Kiev, brokered by the transatlantic Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), aimed at defusing the crisis and address the demands of separatists in the east of the country.

The OSCE wants to help Ukraine achieve "those goals politically rather than through separatism and through the barrel of a gun," Victoria Nuland, assistant US secretary of State for European and Eurasian affairs, told those attending the GLOBSEC 2014 security conference.

The conflict in Ukraine has overshadowed the annual conference, which this year has gathered around 1,000 statesmen, politicians, diplomats, and academics to Bratislava, Slovakia.

"We are confronted with an unprecedented situation challenging not only the post [cold] war order but also peace and security in our region," says Miroslav Lajcak, the foreign minister of Slovakia. "It is obvious we have to react. We are taking part in the political process, we have introduced sanctions, and of course we are getting ready on the military side.... Hope for the best and prepare for the worst."

In a "brainstorming" debate on Ukraine, Andrei Illarionov, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a former economic adviser to Putin, described the crisis as "Mr. Putin's war against Ukraine," and said it was but "one chapter" in a broader Russian strategy.

"The main intention strategically is to provide a divide between the Anglo-Saxon world and continental Europe: the great alliance between Russia and continental Europe on one side against the Anglo-Saxon world, meaning the United States and the United Kingdom," he says.

And, he added, "It's going perfectly" for Russia.

While there was broad consensus on the threat posed by the conflict over Ukraine, there was less unanimity on what can be done to resolve the crisis. Most participants in the debate supported the sanctions regime against Russia. And some suggested alternative methods of coercion, such as increasing oil production to reduce prices and hit oil-rich Russia, or divesting from the country.

Edgars Rinkevics, the foreign minister of Latvia, said there was a need to convey "our message" to the Russians living in the EU as well as Russians inside Russia itself, because internal Russian propaganda presently "surpasses anything we saw in the Soviet era."

Many of the participants favored some form of decentralization, allowing greater autonomy for the regions to dampen separatist ambitions. They also noted that an unexpected consequence of the crisis was the emergence of a far greater sense of Ukrainian nationalism and identity that could undermine Moscow's attempts to exert influence in areas of eastern Ukraine.

"Ukrainian identity has become much, much stronger because of these past months' developments," says Janos Martonyi, the foreign minister of Hungary. "I don't believe that this would have been one of [Russia's] objectives [but] that is exactly what happened."

The OSCE plan being debated in Kiev calls on all sides to refrain from violence, and for the disarming of pro-Moscow rebels while also granting them amnesty. It additionally calls for greater decentralization and a review of the official status of the Russian language, a key demand of Russian-speaking population in eastern Ukraine.