

Russia & Ukraine: the smartened-up story – Chapter II

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In the first chapter of this series, I argued that (on one hand) nothing mitigates Russia's aggression against Ukraine; on the other hand, We The Public (especially in the West) are being fed a shallow, overly simplistic version of reality, which – while correctly identifying Russia and its leader as the main culprits – seeks to whitewash the many and grave errors committed by Ukrainian and Western leaders.

In this series of articles, I attempt to expose the dumbed-down story; and present a smartened-up account, in all its nuances and intricacy.

No paragon of virtue

In the current conflict, Ukraine is unequivocally the victim of Russian aggression. But that does not mean we should take as gospel the picture drawn by Western governments and mainstream media. To quote the Cato Institute:

Statements from U.S. and other Western officials, as well as pervasive accounts in the news media, have created a stunningly misleading image of Ukraine. There has been a concerted effort to portray the country not only as a victim of brutal Russian aggression, but as a plucky and noble bulwark of freedom and democracy. The conventional narrative would have us believe that Ukraine is an Eastern European version of Denmark.

Ukraine may be (hopefully will be!) on its way to embrace liberal democracy. But, make no mistake, it is a long way from that lofty ideal.

The 2022 report published by the Freedom House classes Ukraine as 'Partly free', with a score of 61 out of a possible 100. Here's the Cato Institute again:

Interestingly, Hungary—which has been a target of vitriolic criticism among progressives in the West because of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's conservative social policy—ranks eight points higher than Ukraine, which is the recipient of uncritical praise from the same Western ideological factions.

Israel, by the way (whom some of the same “progressives” accuse of nothing less than apartheid!), is ranked as ‘Free’ with a score of 76.

In its 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index, Transparency International awarded Ukraine a score of 32 – the lowest among European countries with the sole exception of Russia, which scored even lower (29). Despite the well-publicised corruption scandals involving former Prime Minister Netanyahu, Israel (59) scored considerably better – in fact above many EU member states.

Ethnic strife

Since gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine’s political scene has been characterised by a struggle between the East and West of the country. By way of simplification, the East is largely Russian-speaking (as are parts of the South) and tends to elect politicians favouring increased ‘friendship’ with Russia; the Western half of the country largely speaks Ukrainian, is suspicious of Russia and inclines to a closer relationship with the (global) West.

The struggle came to a head in 2010, with the election as President of Ukraine of Viktor Yanukovich. An ethnic Russian, Yanukovich defeated Yulia Tymoshenko by 49% to 45%, a result made possible primarily by voters in the Donbas and other regions with large ethnic Russian population. International observers declared the elections ‘free and fair’ (but then, what do they know...) Tymoshenko alleged extensive vote rigging and – while ultimately withdrawing her legal challenge – refused to accept Yanukovich as the legitimate winner. She was soon accused of various misdeeds in a series of ‘anti-corruption’ legal cases and received a seven-year prison sentence.

All this did not deter the West from continuing to court Ukraine, dangling before it the coveted prize of close political and economic partnership, as well as, eventually, membership of NATO and the European Union. Political convenience trumps moral principles.

Except that, although initially favourably disposed (at least apparently) to that courtship, in December 2013 Yanukovich ultimately refused to sign the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement – a document committing the parties to increased economic and political integration and meant to pave the way towards Ukraine’s accession to full EU membership. Instead, he surprised everybody by opening negotiations towards a ‘strategic partnership treaty’ with Russia. Many smelled a rat: Putin had applied months of economic and political pressure, urging Ukraine to ditch its EU-related plans and join instead a customs union with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. On the other hand, Yanukovich appeared to operate within the letter of the Ukrainian law – as the country’s constitution places the President in charge of negotiating and signing international treaties...

However technically legal, Yanukovich’s decision was followed by mass protests (later dubbed the ‘Euromaidan’ Revolution or the Revolution of Dignity), which descended into extreme violence and actual street fights between militants and police. In January-February 2014, those clashes resulted in the death of more than 120 people (108 protesters, 13 police officers) and the wounding of a further 1,800.

Under pressure and following mediation by the EU and Russia, Yanukovich signed an Agreement on the Settlement of the Political Crisis with the leaders of Parliamentary opposition. He agreed to a curtailment of presidential power, new presidential elections by the end of the year and withdrawal of security forces from central Kyiv. In return, the opposition promised to cease any violent protest and surrender the weapons. But while the police did withdraw, various armed groups refused to comply with the agreement and threatened to storm the presidential compound and the Parliament. While European politicians spoke in general terms ‘against the violence’, they stopped short of condemning what was, in reality, a violation of the article the EU itself mediated.

Yanukovich fled to Russia and was subsequently deposed by the Ukrainian parliament – though in a manner technically inconsistent with the impeachment process prescribed by the constitution. He was eventually tried in absentia, found guilty of high treason and sentenced to 13 years in prison.

A new government was installed, which swiftly rolled back much of Yanukovich’s legacy. All civil servants who served under the former president (up to one million people) were excluded from public office. Again, these excesses did not result in the firm Western condemnations that we would expect, given our leaders’ much vaunted moral principles and democratic credentials.

Yanukovich’s departure may have brought about restored order in Kyiv. But in Eastern and Southern Ukraine (and in other heavily Russian-speaking areas, such as Kharkiv) there were pro-Russian protests, which occasionally clashed with anti-Russian ones. Several people were killed in sporadic bouts of violence. In places (e.g. in the city of Luhansk), the pro-Russian protesters occupied public buildings and replaced the Ukrainian flag with the Russian one. The violence soon intensified to civil war levels, with increasing use of heavy weaponry.

It is difficult to assess the extent to which these protests were native, rather than encouraged or even orchestrated by Russia. In any case, Russia eagerly took advantage of them.

In March 2014, the de-facto leader of Crimea (not recognised by Kyiv) invited Putin to ‘assist with peace-keeping’. The outcome is well-known: following a referendum (deemed illegal by Kyiv) Crimea was (re)annexed by Russia.

Putin attempted to follow a similar pattern in the Donbas, but there the Ukrainian resistance was more intense. Using a strategy already tried and tested in places like Georgia and Moldova, Russia carved out two ‘republics’ (Donetsk People’s Republic, Luhansk People’s Republic) out of Ukrainian territory and used them as bases for further operations.

The West refused to recognise either the annexation of Crimea or the ‘independence’ declared by the two republics. Economic and political sanctions were applied against Russia – even while

the European Union continued to eagerly buy Russian coal, oil and gas (making no real effort to wean itself from the dependence on those Russian products).

On the other hand, Ukraine's plans of acceding to full EU membership were not allowed to progress and the country was not admitted in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

In other words, the West did what it does best: backed off when bullied, while pretending to be tough; and kicked the can down the road, in the forlorn hope that things will resolve themselves, rather than getting worse.

Nationalism, ultra-nationalism and neo-Nazism

One of Putin's claims against Ukraine is the 'Nazi' nature of its government. Indeed, the Russian dictator has made public his intention to 'de-Nazify' the country. In the West, such claims are dismissed as ludicrous. Often, the only 'argument' cited against this claim is that Ukraine's president Zelenskyy is Jewish.

Of course, irrespective of Zelenskyy's ethnicity, Putin's claim is indeed ludicrous. He has not sent the Russian Army into Ukraine to fight Nazism. But that does not mean, unfortunately, that he has not been offered grounds on which to build that spurious narrative.

Ukrainian nationalism was significant as a historical factor during World War II, when it tended to collaborate with the Nazis against the Soviet Union. Harshly repressed by the latter during and after the war, it resurfaced with a vengeance once Ukraine gained its independence in 1991. Many of the policies implemented by the Ukrainian state since then (such as the legislation on the use of Ukrainian, rather than the Russian language) can be described as nationalist.

Unlike many self-described 'progressives', I do not think that nationalism (moderate nationalism, that is) is necessarily something to be frowned upon. I understand the desire to close ranks, to strengthen the national identity, in particular when it is perceived to be under existential attack.

But 'est modus in rebus': while I find moderate nationalism benign and often beneficial, I'll have no truck with the extreme, xenophobic, exclusionary version of the phenomenon. And in Ukraine, the two often not just coexisted, but collaborated; and, what's more, extreme nationalistic factions were often included in and embraced by the state apparatus.

This was only exacerbated by Russia's intervention in Ukraine's internal ethno-linguistic conflict. The armed conflict gave already existing far-right groups not just impetus, a popular

role and access to weaponry – but also direct and often enthusiastic support from the state. It transformed groups of extreme political activists into armed militias.

Arguably the most famous of them is the Azov Battalion. It was founded by Andriy Biletsky – a far-right militant with a very chequered past. He is reported to have said, in 2010 that Ukraine's national mission was to:

lead the white races of the world in a final crusade [...] against Semite-led Untermenschen.

Biletsky has meanwhile toned down his rhetoric and now denies that he ever said that. But few believe that he really changed his views. In 2006, he assumed the leadership of the far-right organisation 'Patriot of Ukraine' – which many analysts view as a fascist, neo-Nazi group. Suffice to say that it was formed by former members of the Social-National Party (!), who decided to leave it as it had become too moderate...

In 2015, a drill sergeant called Alex boasted (in an interview with USA today) that "*no more than half*" of his comrades were neo-Nazis – including himself. He was, however, contradicted by the brigade spokesperson, who said that a more accurate proportion of neo-Nazis was 'just' 10-20%.

And here's the problem: the battalion (later developed into a regiment) was integrated into the Ukrainian security forces (as a National Guard unit). Which means that neo-Nazis (whether 10%, 20% or 50%) are being paid a salary by the Ukrainian state.

Again: this in no way justifies the Russian invasion. But there is something else that isn't justified: the complete silence of Western politicians (as well as most pundits and 'human rights activists') when faced with the ultra-nationalist and neo-Nazi tendencies tolerated (and occasionally embraced) by the Ukrainian governments, especially since 2014. The same 'progressives' that brazenly accuse Israel of 'Judaizing Jerusalem' seem utterly and eerily uninterested by the overt 'Ukrainisation' of a country where 30% of the citizens speak Russian as their mother tongue.

NATO

Yet another Putin complaint concerns Ukraine's potential joining of NATO. He sees the alliance's expansion into Eastern Europe as constituting a direct threat to Russia.

That NATO expanded in the general direction of Russia is a fact. Initially made up of North American and Western European countries (hence the 'North Atlantic' name), NATO was joined by Greece and Turkey in the midst of the Cold War. The latter shared a border with the Soviet Union. But after the demise of the USSR, NATO absorbed within its ranks the former 'socialist' countries of Eastern Europe: Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland in 1999; Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia and the Baltic countries in 2004; Albania and Croatia in 2009, Montenegro in 2017 and, finally, North Macedonia in 2020.

NATO declares itself a defensive pact. But this is unlikely to allay Putin's concerns. And not without reason: the alliance fought in former Yugoslavia and in Afghanistan, for instance – despite the fact that neither country attacked one of its members.

It is also true that USA would likewise not react very well, were Mexico to join a hostile military alliance. The US certainly wasn't cool with Cuba installing Soviet weaponry.

With all that in mind, one must question the wisdom of NATO's expansion eastwards, at a time when the Cold War had already been won. It isn't unreasonable for a Russian leader to ask why NATO chose to consistently expand in one direction only: towards the Russian border. What remains unreasonable, of course, is the military aggression as a means to resolve this situation. Invasion is no way to make friends.