

No need for this cold war

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EU and Russia are antagonistic by accident

The breakup of the Soviet Union, agreed in 1991 by Boris Yeltsin, then the new Russian president, and his Ukrainian and Belarusian counterparts, happened peacefully because the USSR's president Mikhail Gorbachev chose not to stand in its way. But it was pregnant with potential future conflicts: in this multinational space, 25 million Russians were left outside the borders of Russia (which had 147 million inhabitants at the last pre-breakup census in 1989; there were 286 million in the USSR), itself very ethnically diverse. The arbitrary drawing of borders exacerbated tensions between successor states and minorities (in Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Adjara). Many of these multi-ethnic states had never existed before. This was true of Ukraine, which had only been independent for three years in its history (1917-20), after the collapse of the tsarist armies.

The Ukrainian state that came into being in December 1991 was a composite entity. Its western regions had belonged to Poland between the two world wars and the inhabitants of its eastern regions were Orthodox and Russian-speaking. Its Black Sea coast had been Ottoman. Crimea had never been Ukrainian until Nikita Khrushchev decreed it should be in 1954. Ukraine as a state dates back less than a quarter of a century. The privatisations of the 1990s created a class of oligarchs who dominate the state; the economy has deteriorated significantly and debt levels are high. Ukraine's future — as a member of NATO or as a neutral state — is inseparable from the reconfiguration of power relations at European and global level. In 1997 Zbigniew Brzezinski said that the only way to prevent Russia becoming a great power again was to remove Ukraine from its sphere of influence (1).

A reminder of the facts is essential to understand the situation today. The current crisis had been predictable since the Orange revolution of 2004 and Ukraine's first attempt to join NATO. The crisis could have been avoided if the EU had, in launching its Eastern Partnership in 2009, framed the negotiation of the association agreement with Ukraine compatibly with the objective of the 2003 strategic EU-Russia partnership: creating "a single economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok".

It would have been necessary to take into account the close link between the Ukrainian and Russian economies. Had it done so, the EU would have avoided being used by proponents of an eastward expansion of NATO. But Brussels presented Ukraine with an impossible choice between Russia and Europe. As Russia's financial offer was substantially better than Europe's, Ukraine's president Viktor Yanukovich asked for the signing of the association agreement, scheduled for 29 November 2013, to be postponed.

I do not know if Štefan Füle, the EU commissioner, took direction from (then) Commission president José Manuel Barroso or if the Commission ever discussed this issue, though it had the potential to turn into the most serious geopolitical crisis in Europe since the missile crisis of 1982-7. President Putin claimed that in January 2014 the EU authorities — Barroso and Herman Van Rompuy — ruled out any discussion of the content of the association agreement with Ukraine on the grounds that that would infringe Ukrainian sovereignty.

'Exporting democracy'

Yanukovich's postponement of the signing sparked the "pro-European" Maidan demonstrations, which led to his removal on 22 February 2014. It is understandable that the prospect of joining the EU is attractive to a significant proportion of Ukrainians. But it is worth asking whether the EU has a mandate for promoting European norms and standards beyond its borders. The Maidan demonstrations were encouraged by many visits from EU, and especially US, officials, often prominent figures (2), while NGOs and the media conducted an information war. This explicit support for the demonstrations,

which were mostly policed by far-right organisations — Pravyi Sektor and Svoboda — was a potential source of confusion over what fell within the EU’s purview or that of NATO or the US. “Exporting democracy” can take many forms.

The non-application of the February 2014 agreement, which made provision for presidential elections at the end of the year, and the sudden unconstitutional removal of a president who may have had many faults but had been elected, may count as a “revolution” — or as a coup. Russia took the latter view. Although Crimea had been Russian until 1954, it is undeniable that Russia’s decision to annex it, even cloaked in a referendum, was a disproportionate reaction, and ran counter to the principle of respect for the territorial integrity of other states, constantly asserted by Russia, notably when it was flouted by Kosovo’s exit from Yugoslavia. Putin put Russia’s strategic interests in the Black Sea first, probably fearing that the new Ukrainian government would not respect the leasing agreement that gave Russia use of Sebastopol until 2042.

So this crisis was an accidental escalation. The annexation of Crimea was not planned. In February, Putin attended the closing ceremony of the Sochi winter Olympics, intended as a showcase for Russian achievement. He then overreacted to an event that the EU had not planned, but encouraged through carelessness. The question now is whether the EU can regain control of the situation.

Putin probably did not suspect that the US would seize on the annexation of Crimea to impose limited (July 2014) and then more stringent sanctions (September). In May 2014, he said he was ready to contain the conflict. He encouraged Ukraine’s Russian-speaking regions to seek a solution to their problems within the country. On 10 May, François Hollande and Angela Merkel talked about incorporating decentralisation into Ukraine’s constitution. On 25 May, Petro Poroshenko was elected president and immediately recognised by Russia. The “Normandy format” (Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine) was sketched out on 6 June and it seemed the crisis might be defused peacefully.

Spiralling out of control

But things began to get out of control in the summer: the Ukrainian authorities launched an “anti-terrorist” operation against the “self-declared republics”, which riled the population of the Donbass. The operation was short-lived because the Ukrainian army crumbled, despite the support of pro-Maidan “volunteer battalions”. The Minsk I accords, signed on 5 September, declared a ceasefire. Six days later, on 11 September, the US and EU implemented severe sanctions, officially to ensure the ceasefire. With the banks paralysed by US sanctions, EU-Russian trade was progressively restricted and effectively frozen. Russia announced counter-sanctions on food and looked to emerging markets, particularly China, to diversify its foreign trade and industrial cooperation.

Simultaneously, the price of crude collapsed. The rouble fell against the dollar, from 35 to 70 roubles by the end of 2014. Through lack of follow-through, the ceasefire agreements stalled. Ukraine launched a second military offensive, no more successful than the first. Through an initiative coordinated by President Hollande, new accords — Minsk II — were signed on 12 February 2015.

The trap closed again: western sanctions are made to be lifted. But although the military component of Minsk II is being observed, more or less, the political component is problematic. It follows a well-defined sequence: the passing of an electoral law by the Rada (Ukrainian parliament); local elections in the Donbass; constitutional reform; a law on decentralisation; further elections; and finally Ukraine regaining control of its border with Russia. But on 17 March the Rada voted to overturn this sequence by making the “withdrawal of armed groups” a precondition. The Ukrainian government’s block on the political component of Minsk II threatens to turn the Ukrainian crisis into a frozen conflict. The prospect of sanctions being lifted is caught in a vicious circle. In principle, they can only be renewed by unanimous agreement. In reality, there is a risk that the law of consensus will be applied: Angela Merkel announced on 28 April that European sanctions were likely to be renewed in June.

The crisis is a war in all but name. The muted debate between those who wish, quietly, to maintain the EU-Russian partnership as conceived in 2003, and the supporters of a policy of containing or even pushing Russia back (a new cold war) reflects a clash of wills between Russia and the US. There is a proxy war on the ground between the Ukrainian army plus “volunteer battalions”, supported by the US

and its allies, and the “separatist” militias who draw their support mainly from Russian-speakers in the east, with Russian aid that purports to be humanitarian. The pursuit of this conflict may turn Ukraine into a lasting source of conflict between the EU and Russia. Through a widely echoed ideological crusade, the US is attempting both to isolate Russia and to tighten its control over the rest of Europe.

Prophets of a new cold war refer to Russia as a dictatorship, fundamentally hostile to universal values, that wants to rebuild the USSR. To those who know contemporary Russia, that seems exaggerated, even a caricature. Putin owes his popularity to the economic recovery he achieved in Russia after GDP had fallen by half in the 1990s, and his halting of the disintegration of the state. His project is national, not imperial. It is to modernise Russia, which, like any other state, has security concerns.

Putin is not Russia

Old fears can be agitated, but Vladimir Putin is not Russia. The country is being transformed. There is a large and growing middle class, many of whom opposed Putin’s return to power in 2012 but now seem to support him. Even Mikhail Gorbachev believes that since 1991 the West has unjustly treated Russia like a defeated country, though it is a great European nation (3). That Russia paid the heaviest price in the war against Nazi Germany has been airbrushed out of history, as though anti-communism had to outlive communism forever.

The material basis for the cold war — the opposition of antagonistic economic and ideological systems — no longer exists. Russian capitalism has its own particular character, but it is capitalism. Putin believes his conservative values can heal the wounds of 70 years of Bolshevism.

The real issue in the Ukrainian crisis is whether Europe can assert itself as an independent actor in a multipolar world or will take a permanently subordinate role to the US. Current media Russophobia resembles the attempt to shape public opinion at the time of the first Gulf war (1990-1). This conditioning relies on ignorance of what contemporary Russia is really like, if it is not an ideological construction intended to manipulate.

Russia is showing resilience. It is up to France to represent Europe’s best interests, through the Normandy format. It is hard to accept that France’s foreign policy should be undermined by extremist and revisionist tendencies. I see no equivalence between communism and Nazism, unlike the “memorial laws” passed by the Rada in Kiev on 9 April. In the Ukrainian crisis, Germany under Angela Merkel is far too closely aligned with the US. Germany may be tempted to temporarily abandon its traditional Ostpolitik towards Russia to achieve an economic breakthrough with Ukraine. There were 1,800 German industrial concerns in Ukraine in 2010, and just 50 French. Ukraine is a natural extension of the pool of low-cost labour in Mitteleuropa, which has given German industry a comparative advantage, though wage increases in central and eastern Europe have been eroding it. Germany must convince its European partners that it is not just the US’s proxy in Europe, the impression given by the National Security Agency drawing on the services of the BND (4). The Normandy format must be the way to implement Minsk II and lift Ukraine’s opposition to pushing through the political component of the accord. Europe has financial levers.

It is time for a “European Europe” to show itself. It could start by trying to convince the US that its true interests are not served by driving Russia out of the West, but in participation in redefining mutually acceptable rules of the game that can restore reasonable confidence.