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THE GAME OF UKRAINE: CONFLICT IN DONBASS AS AN OUTCOME OF THE MULTILAYERED RIVALRY

ABSTRACT This paper analyzes the war in Ukraine as an outcome of multilayered rivalry combined with unintentional mistakes committed by all possible sides. The first layer of competition concerns domestic differences visible between the Western and Eastern part of Ukraine. The second layer covers the regional rivalry between Poland and Russia, which has significantly contributed to the instability of Eastern Europe for several centuries. Finally, the third layer concerns the geopolitical game for influence between the West, led by the United States, and Russia along with several satellite states. Ukraine proved to be just another object of this competition, composed of such events as the Kosovo intervention, the Orange Revolution, the Caucasus war in 2008 and the Syrian chemical crisis.

Keywords: war in Ukraine, Euromaidan, Donbass, Crimea

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of 2014, one of the most popular subjects of international scientific debate in security studies concerns the military conflict in Ukraine. Notably, Western experts, politicians, journalists, commentators and blogosphere pundits, both in Europe and America, attempt to outdo one another with their original interpretations of this war.¹ Usually these opinions are inaccurate, oversimplifying or exaggerating complex processes and tendencies which have contributed to the eruption of military conflict in Donbass. This is due to several reasons.

Firstly, since the beginning of the 21st century most of transatlantic community have nursed a false belief that times of serious military conflicts in Europe, which could endanger the borders of NATO/the EU, are long gone.² Of course, such threats were still stressed in various official statements and documents, but the falseness of these statements has been illustrated by the constantly lowering military budgets in Western and Central Europe. As Sam Perlo-Freeman, Elisabeth Sköns, Carina Solmirano and Helén Wilandh from SIPRI emphasized, *between 2008 and 2012, 20 of 37 countries in the region reduced military spending by more than 10 per cent in real terms, including all but 3 countries in Central Europe*.³ This trend was recently symbolized by media reports indicating the growing weakness of the German army.⁴ Meanwhile decision-makers both in the United States and Western Europe focused on a plethora of other security challenges, starting with global terrorism, through illegal immigration, to cybersecurity.⁵ Therefore, the eruption of a serious military conflict in Ukraine, involving Russia, despite the previous warning in August 2008 (The Caucasus crisis) was met with astonishment and disbelief, blurring the perception of various processes which have contributed to the course of events.

¹ See for example S. Blockmans, 'How Should the EU Respond to Russia's War in Ukraine?', *CEPS Commentary*, 3 September 2014; G. Spagnol, 'The Ukrainian Crisis: Prologue to the Third World War?', *IERI Working Paper*, No. 15 (2014); S. Woehrel, *Ukraine: Current Issues and U.S. Policy*, Washington 2014 (*CRS Report*, RL33460); P. Belkin, D.E. Mix, S. Woehrel, *NATO: Response to the Crisis in Ukraine and Security Concerns in Central and Eastern Europe*, Washington 2014 (*CRS Report*, R43478); A. Bebler, 'Freezing a Conflict: The Russian-Ukrainian Struggle over Crimea', *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2014), at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2014.11446603>>.

² See for example: M. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, D. Verdier, 'European Integration as a Solution to War', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2005), pp. 99-135, at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1354066105050138>>.

³ Between 2008 and 2012 Great Britain alone cut its military expenditures by 5.2%. See S. Perlo-Freeman et al., 'Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2012', *SIPRI Fact Sheet* (April 2013), p. 5.

⁴ A. Hall, 'Germany's Military Too Weak to Fight', *The Times*, 8 October 2014, at <<http://www.the-times.co.uk/tto/news/world/europe/article4229877.ece>>, 25 June 2015.

⁵ See Th. Renard, 'The Rise of Cyber-Diplomacy: The EU, its Strategic Partners and Cyber-Security', *ESPO Working Paper*, No. 7 (June 2014); R. de Nevers, 'NATO's International Security Role in the Terrorist Era', *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (2007), at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/isec.2007.31.4.34>>; K. Archick, *U.S.-EU Cooperation Against Terrorism*, Washington 2014 (*CRS Report*, RS22030).

Secondly, contemporary Ukraine is a unique country located in a unique region, which is an increasingly unpopular subject of deepened analysis among Western scholars. It is a state composed of multiple, often contradictory, processes which are usually difficult to understand for academics, who have little experience of the politics, history, economy and culture of Central and Eastern Europe. Those who have this necessary background are sometimes incapable of reaching beyond current political divisions, which results in a lopsided approach towards the Ukrainian conflict. Therefore, many experts fail to grasp all of the important nuances of the Donbass crisis. Complex issues are usually explained in an oversimplified and one-dimensional manner.

Thirdly, as Greek ancient dramatist Aeschylus wrote, *in war, truth is the first casualty*.⁶ Since the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, we can witness the introduction of elements of information warfare – notably PSYOP and MILDEC⁷ – in media reports around the world, regardless of their origin. While the Western and Ukrainian press and TV stations threaten audiences with the specter of a new Cold War caused by Vladimir Putin,⁸ the Kremlin controlled are doing basically the same, fuelling the atmosphere of being encircled by current or potential enemies.⁹ Due to a profound lack of journalist objectivity while reporting the course of events in Eastern Europe, it is increasingly difficult to carry out an unprejudiced analysis of this conflict.

Thus, it is unsurprising that so far there have been little complex and neutral studies over this conflict published in English. Some of the most accurate and valuable, prepared by John J. Mearsheimer,¹⁰ Paul J. Sanders,¹¹ and Dmitri Trenin,¹² are usually focused on only one dimension of this crisis, although it has many more. Other popular analyses are either overly simplistic, exaggerated or biased, ignoring the series of mistakes made by decision-makers on both sides.

From the Western perspective, since its creation, Ukraine has been perceived as a state with a range of problems, though these issues were usually suppressed, hidden

⁶ Aeschylus, The Quotation Page, at <<http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/28750.html>>, 26 June 2015.

⁷ Fred Schreier defined PSYOP as *planned operations to convey selected information to targeted foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups and individuals*. Military Deception (MILDEC), according to Schreier *guides an enemy into making mistakes by presenting false information, images, statements*. See F. Schreier, 'On Cyberwarfare', *DCAF Horizon 2015 Working Paper*, No. 7, p. 20.

⁸ See for example: S. Tisdall, 'The New Cold War: Are We Going Back to the Bad Old Days?', *The Guardian*, 19 November 2014, at <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/19/new-cold-war-back-to-bad-old-days-russia-west-putin-ukraine>>, 25 June 2015.

⁹ See for example: J. Dougherty, 'Everyone Lies: The Ukraine Conflict and Russia's Media Transformation', *Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy Discussion Paper Series* (July 2014).

¹⁰ J.J. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault. The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin', *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2014).

¹¹ P.J. Saunders (ed.), *Costs of A New Cold War. The U.S.-Russia Confrontation over Ukraine*, Washington D.C. 2014 (*Center for the National Interest Report*).

¹² D. Trenin, *The Ukraine Crisis and the Resumption of Great-Power Rivalry*, Washington 2014 (*Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Working Paper*).

under the coating of relative stability.¹³ In reality, since its creation, Ukraine has been an area of increasing differences and tensions, partly inherited from difficult historical processes, and partly developed during the post-Cold War era. It has become a country permeated by conflicting interests and long-lasting divisions. Furthermore, Ukraine has always been highly dependent on its relationships with external forces, notably Washington, Brussels, Berlin, Paris, Warsaw and Moscow, as the “Orange Revolution” clearly proved. Since 1991 Ukraine has become not only a subject of international relations, but also an object of intensifying rivalry on various levels. Zbigniew Brzezinski described the situation accurately in 1997: *Ukraine, a new and important space on the Euroasian chessboard, is a geopolitical pivot because its very existence as an independent country helps to transform Russia. Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Euroasian empire [...] Ukraine’s loss of independence would have immediate consequences for Central Europe, transforming Poland into the geopolitical pivot on the eastern frontier of a united Europe.*¹⁴ Influence over Kiev proved to be a prize of the constantly accelerating race between many forces, both domestic and international. Moreover, “the game of Ukraine” is not a phenomenon of the 21st century. Its roots can be traced back as far as the Middle Ages, which are constantly making a significant contribution to the instability of the whole region.

There are three goals of this study. Firstly, to present all major tendencies, interests and forces, which have consciously or unconsciously took part in the series of events which have led to this war. Conflict in Donbass, in contrary to popular beliefs in the West, was caused both by a mixture of intentional acts and disastrous errors, committed by almost all of the parties involved. Secondly, to provide an answer to the question, why the conflict in Ukraine erupted in 2014, and not during the Orange Revolution, which in many aspects was similar to the Euromaidan? Finally, the last goal is to contribute to future studies on the events taking place in Ukraine by providing a new conceptual approach, based on a category of multilayered rivalry.¹⁵ To reach all of these objectives, the analysis of this conflict should focus on three layers of rivalry concerning Ukraine: (1) long-lasting domestic, inter-ethnic and inter-religious competition; (2) traditional regional rivalry between the Central and Eastern European states, Ukraine and Russia; (3) the global, geopolitical battle for influence between two blocks of states, the United States and its partners (NATO/EU) on the one hand, and Russia, followed by its group of satellite and client states on the other.

¹³ T. Kuzio, J.D. Moroney, ‘Ukraine and the West: Moving from Stability to Strategic Engagement’, *European Security*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2001), at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09662830108407496>>.

¹⁴ Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard. American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, New York 1997, p. 46.

¹⁵ The meaning of the interstate rivalry was accurately summed by Paul R. Hensel, who stated that a full-fledged “enduring rivalry” [...] requires (1) that two adversaries engage in a competitive relationship over one or more stakes that they view as important, (2) that each perceives that the other has hostile intentions and poses a significant security threat, and (3) that the competitive relationship has lasted for a substantial period of time and is expected to last into the foreseeable future. See P.R. Hensel, ‘An Evolutionary Approach to the Study of Interstate Rivalry’, *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1999), p. 176.

This paper has been divided into four parts. The first one contains a short review of all of the major events which have directly contributed to the eruption of war over Donbass. Based on these, the second chapter attempts to outline and explain the eruption of this conflict whilst taking into account domestic rivalry between various ethnic, religious and political groups, the roots of this rivalry and its consequences. The third chapter aims to clarify the significance of the least known and analyzed regional layers of rivalry, notably traditional Polish-Russian competition in this area. Finally, the last chapter puts the 2013-2014 Ukraine crisis into the context of the rising global rivalry between the West and Russia in the post-Cold War era.

THE ROAD TO WAR

Until 2014, Western spectators usually remembered Ukraine only due to one event, which grabbed the attention of the worldwide media: the Orange Revolution in 2004.¹⁶ It was also the first time that Victor Yanukovych was depicted as a villain and a direct threat to the constantly transforming Ukrainian democracy. Shortly afterwards, it became clear that the new revolutionary authorities led by Viktor Yushenko and Yulia Tymoshenko failed to meet both domestic and international expectations, as Ukraine was bogged down by intensive political rivalry between these opposition leaders.¹⁷ The new government did not meet the hopes cherished in some European capitals, that Kiev would introduce a strongly pro-Western posture in its foreign policy.¹⁸ Additionally, there was a complete lack of necessary reforms, which were expected by the Ukrainian public.

As a result of widespread dissatisfaction over the unchanged domestic political and economic situation, Victor Yanukovych was given a second chance, gaining first a premiership, and later on, in 2010, winning presidential elections. As a pro-Russian politician he was widely expected to oversee a visible shift, from the, usually, balanced Yushenko foreign policy towards a strict political alliance with Moscow. Initially, these expectations were confirmed as Kiev agreed to prolong the lease on Russia's naval base in Sevastopol until 2042, in turn obtaining a discount on Russian gas prices.¹⁹ In the meantime, however, Yanukovych proved to be quite elastic with regards to relations with the European Union, continuing a slow but steady march towards association. It naturally raised the public's expectations, as Ukrainians were hoping that strengthened cooperation with the EU – followed by full membership – would significantly raise their quality of life. Such a strategy proved to be a major mistake, as they did not take

¹⁶ K. Wolczuk, 'Ukraine after the Orange Revolution', *Centre for European Reform Policy Brief* (2005).

¹⁷ T. Kuzio, 'Yushchenko versus Tymoshenko: Why Ukraine's National Democrats Are Divided', *Demokratyzatsiya*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2013), pp. 228-240.

¹⁸ For example, former Polish ambassador in Kiev Marek Ziółkowski wrote in 2008 that the Polish-Ukrainian strategic partnership should be aimed to bring Eastern Europe closer to the European Union. These hopes, however, were disappointed. See M. Ziółkowski, *Projekt Ukraina*, Wrocław 2008, pp. 142-143 (*Biblioteka Nowej Europy Wschodniej*).

¹⁹ R. McMahon (ed.), *Ukraine in Crisis*, Council on Foreign Relations, 18 March 2014, p. 6.

into consideration the possible reaction of Russia, strongly opposing Ukrainian membership in the European Union. Moreover, this delicate situation was further complicated by the excessive demands of Brussels to release Yulia Tymoshenko from prison. These requests were eventually rejected by Kiev.²⁰ Facing a difficult choice between expected Russian retaliation and the dissatisfaction of the Ukrainian society combined with European Union criticism, in November 2013 Kiev decided to suspend preparations to sign the association agreement with the EU.

This move was clearly influenced by the potential profits and losses, which indicated that Ukraine would stand to lose much more if it suffered harsh Russian sanctions, given the strong economic ties between both countries.²¹ Moscow, being aware of this fact, in mid-2013 increased its political and economic pressure on Ukraine, stating that its association with the EU would be "suicidal" for Kiev. Meanwhile, the Kremlin introduced a series of preliminary sanctions, notably new, time-consuming border procedures and import bans. These decisions constituted, therefore, a serious threat to Ukrainian economic security.²²

Authorities, however, did not take into consideration the reaction of a disappointed, disgruntled and angry public. Surprisingly, these economic and energetic nuances were not understood by the majority of the Ukrainian public, which generally perceived the EU as the mythical cornucopia. In effect, the reaction was one of outrage at the suspension of the association agreement. On the night of 21st November 2013, the first massive protests in Kiev began, later being nicknamed "Euromaidan." This protest eventually resulted in a series of brutal clashes with security forces. It has to be noted that, at the beginning, the course of events was similar to the Orange Revolution, as the riots in the Independence Square were widely supported by a wide range of Western and Central European politicians. Plus, they were also co-funded by some Western NGOs.²³

From the beginning of 2014 street clashes became increasingly brutal. Both sides, not one, in contrast to biased media reports, resorted to excessive violence, extending to the use of firearms, which caused many casualties.²⁴ Meanwhile, as Ryszard Zięba

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 3-4.

²¹ It has to be noted, that at the time Russia was the first export destination for Ukraine (24%) and a major partner in various business ventures, especially concerning military, energy and hi-tech industry. See H. Clement, 'Economic Aspects of Ukrainian-Russian Relations' in K.R. Spillman, A. Wenger, D. Muller (eds.), *Between Russia and the West. Foreign and Security Policy of Independent Ukraine*, Bern 1999 (*Studien zu Zeitgeschichte und Sicherheitspolitik*, 2); A. McLees, E. Rumer, 'Saving Ukraine's Defense Industry', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 30 July 2014, at <<http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/07/30/saving-ukraine-s-defense-industry>>, 28 June 2015; OEC, 'Ukraine', at <<http://atlas.media.mit.edu/profile/country/ukr/>>, 28 June 2015.

²² 'Russian Threatens Ukraine Trade War over EU Deal', *New Europe*, 19 August 2013, at <<http://www.neurope.eu/article/russian-threatens-ukraine-trade-war-over-eu-deal>>, 28 June 2015.

²³ M. Stolarczyk, 'Dylematy bezpieczeństwa Polski w kontekście kryzysu i konfliktu ukraińskiego w latach 2013-2014' in K. Czornik, M. Lakomy (eds.), *Dylematy polityki bezpieczeństwa Polski na początku drugiej dekady XXI wieku*, Katowice 2014, pp. 44-45.

²⁴ There is still a vivid discussion over the use of firearms during the Maidan clashes, but available footage on the Internet and media reports indicate that both sides employed them. See D. Babich, 'Ukraine

emphasized, the opposition to the government was infiltrated by radical nationalists, representing among others the Right Sector, which went as far as formulating territorial claims against Poland. Also, these protests evolved from the initial demand of European integration towards overall anti-systemic revolution.²⁵ At the peak of the tensions in Kiev, European governments were heavily involved in mediations between the conflicting sides. Foreign affairs ministers of Poland, France and Germany, along with Russian representatives, met with opposition leaders and President Yanukovich in order to work out a satisfactory political solution. A compromise was accepted by all sides on February 21st, consisting of, among other things, constitutional reforms and earlier presidential elections. Unfortunately, it did not put an end to the Euromaidan protests, as some of the most radical groups rejected the agreement.²⁶

It turned out to be the turning point of the crisis, triggering a massive increase in violence. Yanukovich, fearing for his life, decided to flee to Russia. The opposition immediately took power in Kiev, which completely changed not only the domestic situation, but also undermined the political equilibrium in Central and Eastern Europe. Three consequences were most evident at this time. First of all, the February 21st agreement was in tatters and the conflicting ambitions of different groups and regions constituting Ukraine prevailed over the need for consensus. Ukraine plunged into increasing chaos, as new authorities not only struggled to seize control over the whole country, but also had to face rising political, social and economic crisis. Secondly, Russian-speaking citizens were generally very critical towards the new political elite created by Euromaidan, perceiving them as warmongering fascists who had illegally seized power in Kiev. This perception directly led to the popular protests in Crimea and Donbass, which started in February 2014. Finally, the revolution in Kiev appeared to be a serious blow for Moscow, which had lost a major partner on its western border. It was especially harmful for its traditional "Near Neighborhood" policy. This chaotic situation was also potentially threatening for its control over the Sevastopol naval base, which holds strategic importance in the Black Sea basin.²⁷

Facing this difficult situation, the Kremlin chose to use force against the new Ukrainian authorities, exploiting an unstable transition period in Kiev and the rising unrest in southern and eastern parts of the country. From the end of February 2014, the first "little green men" groups started to appear on the streets of major cities on

Crisis: Who Fired the Shots that Shook the Maidan?', *The Telegraph*, 28 May 2014, at <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sponsored/rbth/politics/10857920/ukraine-murder-maidan.html>>, 30 June 2015; Ch. Eger, 'What the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution Can Tell Us about Gun Control', *FirearmsTalk*, 23 February 2014, at <<http://www.firearmstalk.com/What-the-2014-Ukrainian-Revolution-can-tell-us-about-gun-control.html>>, 30 June 2015.

²⁵ R. Zięba, 'Międzynarodowe implikacje kryzysu ukraińskiego', *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (2014), pp. 17-18.

²⁶ 'Agreement on the Settlement of Crisis in Ukraine', at <http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/cae/servlet/contentblob/671350/publicationFile/190027/140221-UKR_Erklaerung.pdf>, 1 July 2015.

²⁷ About importance of this naval base see: I. Delanoë, 'Sébastopol: de la l'URSS à l'Ukraine, les enjeux du changement de souveraineté de 1991', *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, Vol. 86 (2013).

the Crimean Peninsula. This precise and well-planned invasion was met with almost no resistance from Ukrainian troops, who could have successfully countered the asymmetric strategy used by the Russians. Obviously, the Ukrainian military would lose any serious armed encounter with the Federation's troops, but their resistance could have slowed their progress. Moreover, fighting in Crimea would be much more difficult to digest for the Western community, which seemed confused by the accelerating course of events in the East. Nevertheless, due to Ukrainian inactivity, in March, Crimea officially joined the Federation of Russia.²⁸ It constituted an outstanding success for the new Russian military strategy, which had effectively realized one of the basic principles of Sun Tzu – *therefore the skillful leader subdues the enemy's troops without any fighting*.²⁹ As Jānis Bērziņš emphasized *the Crimean campaign has been an impressive demonstration of strategic communication [...] Its success can be measured by the fact that in just three weeks, and without a shot being fired, the morale of the Ukrainian military was broken and all of their 190 bases had surrendered*.³⁰

Despite the hopes of many EU governments, this was just the beginning of the Russian counter-reaction, as in April 2014 massive protests in the generally pro-Russian Donbass region took place. Eventually anti-Euromaidan riots transformed into organized attacks against police stations and resulted in the seizure of multiple weapon caches. This, in turn, led to the arming of the first rebel groups, who were quickly supported by unmarked Russian soldiers, making a stand against Ukrainian ATO forces who were quickly scrambled to the East. It should be noted that the loss of control over Donbass was much more painful for Kiev than the loss of Crimea, due to the essential economic and demographic potential of this region (coal mines, dense population, heavy industry). Therefore, it was clear that the new authorities in Kiev would endeavor to regain it. In effect, between April 2014 and mid-2015, the military conflict between the ATO forces and the Donbass rebels, supported by Russia, caused estimated casualties of around 6400 people and more than 2 million were forced to seek refuge.³¹

²⁸ 'Crimea, Sevastopol Officially Join Russia as Putin Signs Final Decree', RT.com, 21 March 2014, at <<http://rt.com/news/russia-parliament-crimea-ratification-293/>>, 2 July 2015.

²⁹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, transl. by L. Giles, Leicester 2000, p. 9.

³⁰ J. Bērziņš, 'Russia's New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defense Policy', *Center for Security and Strategic Research Policy Papers*, No. 2 (April 2014), p. 4.

³¹ I. Moldovan, 'Ukraine: World's Unseen Refugee Crisis', Al Jazeera, 24 July 2015, at <<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2015/07/ukraine-worlds-unseen-refugee-crisis-150720082647225.html>>, 28 July 2015; T. Barrabi, 'Ukraine Conflict Death Toll Surpasses 6,400 Amid New Evidence of Russian Military Involvement', *International Business Times*, 1 June 2015, at <<http://www.ibtimes.com/ukraine-conflict-death-toll-surpasses-6400-amid-new-evidence-russian-military-1946761>>, 2 July 2015; 'More Casualties Amid Fears of an Escalation in Eastern Ukraine Conflict', *Deutsche Welle*, 13 November 2014, at <<http://www.dw.de/more-casualties-amid-fears-of-an-escalation-in-eastern-ukraine-conflict/a-18060409>>, 2 July 2015; 'US Says More than 1 Million Ukrainian Refugees Fleeing Conflict Zones', *The Moscow Times*, 2 September 2014, at <<http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/un-says-more-than-1-million-ukrainian-refugees-fleeing-conflict-zones/506311.html>>, 2 July 2015.

This short overview of the sequence of events which directly led to the eruption of this conflict proves that its sources are much more complex than commonly believed in the West. The lack of goodwill to resolve this crisis peacefully was evident amongst all interested sides, not only pro-Russian, as depicted by mass media. This situation was profoundly connected to the varied, often contrary, interests of multiple groups involved in Ukraine, both domestic and international. Accurate diagnosis, as to why these differences have caused the eruption of military conflict in Donbass, in contrary to the Orange Revolution, requires, therefore, the decomposition of these events whilst taking into consideration three layers of rivalry.

LAYER ONE: DOMESTIC DIFFERENCES AND THEIR MEANING FOR THE POLITICAL STABILITY OF UKRAINE

As previously mentioned, post-Cold War Ukraine was a country of paradoxes. Outwardly it seemed to be stable, but it was ethnically, religiously, linguistically and ideologically divided. These profound differences within Ukrainian society have had a strong influence on political and economic processes since 1991, and were consequently contributing to intensifying domestic rivalries. The source of these problems lies in the unique history of this country.

Kiev is widely perceived by historians as a cradle of medieval Rus, as well as one of the most important centers of Orthodox Christianity. In the past such attitudes, however, often provoked tensions, as Russians had frequently argued that the primacy over Rus belonged to the Grand Duchy of Moscow.³² The problem of leadership amongst Eastern Slavs was rather insignificant during the Middle Ages, when the territory of contemporary Ukraine was seized by its neighbors. Between the 14th and 18th centuries most of this territory was under the control of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. During this period, it was subjected to multivariate processes. Among others: (1) Muslim Tartars incursions; (2) Polish cultural influence; (3) the rise of Cossacks; (4) wars against the Ottoman Empire; (5) uprisings; (6) and the creation of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.³³ During the 17th century and continuing to this day, Ukraine became a target of constant pressure from Moscow, rivaling Poland over this area. Most of these complicated processes ended in the 18th century, when all territories of the former Kievan Rus were conquered by the Russian Empire. In the following centuries, Ukraine was subjected to the predominant influence of Russian culture.

After World War I, history repeated itself, as Ukraine, despite its unsuccessful efforts to regain independence, was once more divided between Poland and Bolshevik Russia. The reinstatement of Polish rule over Ukraine's western territories for the

³² See N. Davies, *Vanished Kingdoms. The History of Half-Forgotten Europe*, London 2011, chap. 5; T. Kuzio, 'National Identity and History Writing in Ukraine', *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (2006), pp. 407-427, at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00905990600842080>>.

³³ See e.g. S. Rudnitsky, *The Ukraine and the Ukrainians*, Jersey City, N.J. 1915, pp. 11-14.

next two decades raised protests and armed opposition from nationalists, notably the OUN – Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists – demanding sovereignty. On the other side of the border, Ukrainians under the rule of the Soviets suffered *Holodomor*, a famine that killed around 4 million people, this was also combined with communist repressions. This specific period came to an end in 1939, when western Ukraine was conquered by the Soviets. World War II not only shaped most of the borders of contemporary Ukraine, but also contributed to the deep divisions among its society, despite the brutal ethnic policies of Stalin, that is to say, the forcible relocation of ethnic populations.³⁴

All of these historical experiences had a profound influence on the character of independent Ukraine after 1991. On the one hand, they had contributed to the creation of Ukrainian national identity, which has emerged in opposition both to Poles and Russians, despite the fact that Ukraine has been frequently referred to as “Little Russia.” This is due to the fact, that in terms of culture, language and religion they had much more in common with Moscow than with Warsaw.³⁵ On the other hand, post-Cold War Ukraine proved to be a country seriously divided over many past events. There are several significant examples.

To begin with, due to the long-term subordination to Russia/the Soviet Union and its cultural proximity to Moscow, Ukrainian society was fragmented along the lines of significant ethnic and linguistic differences. While the Western and Central parts of this country identified themselves with the revival of the Ukrainian national identity and language, Eastern and Southern areas were reluctant to accept the new situation, feeling more like Russian nationals. This split was highlighted by the results of the 2001 census, indicating that only about 77.8% of citizens identified themselves as Ukrainians. As much as 17.3% of the society perceived themselves as Russians.³⁶ These profound divisions were even more evident when it comes to linguistic preferences. According to a 2012 poll, only around 45% of respondents use Ukrainian at home, while 39% speak Russian. 15% of Ukraine’s citizens use Russian and Ukrainian equally.³⁷

Secondly, ethnic and language differences often go hand in hand with religious differences. Despite the fact that the majority of the Ukrainian population is Christian, there are some visible differences between various local churches, notably: the Greek Catholic Church, connected to Rome and supported by Poles throughout centuries, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kiev Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of

³⁴ See more: R. Szporluk, *Russia, Ukraine, and the Breakup of the Soviet Union*, Stanford 2000; P.R. Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine. The Land and Its Peoples*, Toronto 2010.

³⁵ See S. Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations. Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus*, Cambridge 2006, pp. 299-302.

³⁶ ‘Ukraine’s Sharp Divisions’, BBC News, 23 April 2014, at <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26387353>>, 3 July 2015.

³⁷ But obviously the preference of Russian language among many Ukrainian citizens cannot be equated with the positive approach towards Russian interests. ‘The Language Question, the Results of Recent Research in 2012’, Соціологічна група РЕЙТИНГ, 25 May 2012, at <<http://ratinggroup.com.ua/en/products/politic/data/entry/14004/>>, 3 July 2015.

the Moscow Patriarchate.³⁸ All three are significant when it comes to various political processes within the country, despite the fact that many citizens are, in fact, atheist. To summarize, Moscow Patriarchate Orthodoxes usually exhibit much more understanding towards Russian activities in Eastern Europe, while Kiev Patriarchate Orthodoxes and Greek Catholics identify themselves with strictly Ukrainian national interests.

Thirdly, ethnic, linguistic and religious disparities between the West and East of the country after 1991 had a strong effect on contradictory opinions of various historical events, which held great importance for domestic politics. These controversies usually concerned the perception of World War II, as well as communism during the Soviet Union era. And here again, a general geographical division wise was clear and almost exactly the same as in the aforementioned differences. Western and Central Ukraine, long under Polish rule drew its historical legitimization from the legacy of Stepan Bandera. He was a highly controversial figure, leader of the OUN/UIA – the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists/the Ukrainian Insurgent Army – cooperating with Nazi Germany during World War II and ideologically responsible for the ethnic cleansings of Poles in Volhynia. Despite his criminal actions and radical views, he is recognized by the majority of the population as a national hero. Symbolically, he was even posthumously awarded a Hero of Ukraine medal by Viktor Yushchenko at the end of his presidency. On the other hand, eastern and southern parts of the country were widely critical towards the rising popularity of Bandera, which was consistent with the Soviet/Russian perception of World War II.³⁹ Instead, people in Donbass and Crimea usually held a positive attitude towards communism and its impact on contemporary Ukraine, cultivating symbols and traditions of the former USSR. This rupture was even more paradoxical, as nationalist proponents of Bandera typically support integration with the European Union. At the same time, the Russian-speaking minority were much more interested in enhanced collaboration with Moscow.

All of these deep divisions are interspersed in multiple domestic political processes over the last two decades. Differences between the pro-European, mostly nationalist, and Greek Catholic West and pro-Russian, yearning for communist times, Orthodox East are clearly visible, especially since the beginning of the 21st century. They mostly focused around political preferences and choices between the Donbass-based Party of Regions (Regions of Ukraine) and a multitude of opposition groups, demanding, at least officially, structural reforms and European integration.⁴⁰ These conflicting views became evident to the international community during the presidential elections in 2004, which were a major cause of the Orange Revolution. It was a clear sign of the

³⁸ U.S. Department of State. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 'Ukraine 2012 International Religious Freedom Report' in *International Religious Freedom Report for 2012*; 'Religions in Ukraine', RISU – Religious Information Service of Ukraine, at <<http://risu.org.ua/en/index/reference>>, 3 July 2015.

³⁹ C.J. Levy, "‘Hero of Ukraine’ Prize to Wartime Partisan Is Revoked", *The New York Times*, 12 January 2011, at <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/13/world/europe/13ukraine.html>>, 3 July 2015.

⁴⁰ See T. Kuzio, 'From Kuchma to Yushchenko. Ukraine's 2004 Presidential Elections and the Orange Revolution', *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (2005), pp. 29-44.

impact such a rupture within a country can have on political processes. Since then the pattern has been simple: while Western and Central Ukraine preferred Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko, Eastern and Southern Ukraine voted for Viktor Yanukovich and the Party of Regions.⁴¹

This domestic puzzle was even more complicated due to some of the highly dubious activities of the privileged business elite – oligarchs – who were ideologically divided, excessively influential, and strongly contributing to the worsening social and economic conditions in the country. They were repeatedly accused of having illegal influence on legislative processes, corruption and connections with the mafia. In effect, it was widely believed that the Ukrainian version of “brutal crony capitalism” was down to them.⁴² Thus, it was another important factor increasing public discontent and divisions, as citizens did not possess enough influence over the course of events in their country.

All of these multidimensional dissimilarities within Ukrainian society, mostly resulting from a complex and unique history, have created a specific mosaic of, often, contrary interests and ambitions. These, in turn, have contributed to increasing domestic rivalry, which was in turn manifested in political competition and decreasing political culture.⁴³ Brought together, all these factors caused a profound rupture between two parts of the country, representing different perceptions of history, political goals, national identity and language. This widening chasm has caused serious tensions, which reached a boiling point in 2004. This time, however, the success of Western Ukraine’s ambitions, personified by the victory of Victor Yushchenko, for a time allowed the venting of public dissatisfaction over the worsening standards of living and a lack of opportunities.

Domestic rivalry peaked once again during the 2013/2014 crisis in Kiev. The majority of citizens from Western and Central Ukraine, embittered by the Orange Revolution, hoped for a better tomorrow thanks to association with the European Union. These expectations were contradictory to the political ambitions of the Eastern and Southern part of the country, which were rather Euro-skeptical and preferred to maintain close ties and relations with Russia. Thus, when the authorities announced their decision to suspend the association agreement, it resulted in public outrage in Kiev, street protests and serious clashes with security forces, while Donbass and Crimea supported the government’s decision. Soon after, as Kateryna Pishchikova and Olesia Gryzko noted, *protesters’ demands evolved from support for further integration with the EU to include domestic grievances, most importantly discontent with corruption and the lack of the rule of law.*⁴⁴

⁴¹ M. Fisher, ‘This One Map Helps Explain Ukraine’s Protests’, *The Washington Post*, 9 December 2013, at <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/12/09/this-one-map-helps-explain-ukraines-protests/>>, 4 July 2015.

⁴² S. Leshchenko, ‘Ukraine’s Oligarchs Are Still Calling the Shots’, *Foreign Policy*, 14 August 2014, at <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/08/14/ukraines_oligarchs_are_still_calling_the_shots_0>, 4 July 2015.

⁴³ See T. Kuzio, ‘Political Culture and Democracy. Ukraine as an Immobile State’, *East European Politics & Societies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2011), pp. 88-113, at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0888325410388410>>.

⁴⁴ K. Pishchikova, O. Gryzko, ‘Civic Awakening: The Impact of Euromaidan on Ukraine’s Politics and Society’, *FRIDE Working Paper*, No. 124 (July 2014), p. 3.

Public discontent in Central and Western Ukraine focused on Victor Yanukovych, perceived as the person responsible for the lack of democratic standards and widespread corruption.

The suspension of the association treaty with the EU was just the spark that ignited anger and revealed again shallowly buried divisions. Change of government, according to the Western areas of Ukraine, should be just the first step towards the deep transformation of system in Ukraine, based on European integration, liberal reforms, and, paradoxically, Bandera-nationalism. This far-reaching shift was, however, perceived in Donbass and Crimea as a *coup d'état* organized by fascists – due to popular “Banderism” – the United States and the European Union. Thus, the East recognized it as a move directed against crucial Russian-speaking minority interests, aiming to maintain strong ties with the Federation. Observing the military actions of Russia in the Crimean Peninsula, they were encouraged to take up arms against, what they perceived to be, the illegal regime in Kiev. In contrary to the 2004 revolution, this time they had the confidence that they will receive support from the Kremlin.

Thus, the initial sources of the conflict which had erupted in April 2014 lie in deep divisions among Ukrainian society, inspiring multidimensional domestic rivalry between the West and East. The most evident issues which have led to this war concern contradictory: (1) perceptions of European integration; (2) perceptions of relations with Russia; (3) perceptions of common history; (4) opinions on the role of the Russian language and culture in Ukraine; (5) views on the legality of the change of government in February 2014; (6) ideologies – Banderism vs. communism.

To recapitulate, these profound differences contributed to the domestic game of Ukraine, the game for the future shape of this country: pro-European and nationalist or pro-Russian, cultivating the memory of the communist era. These inconsistent ambitions have, for years, led to paradoxes and repeated tensions, which finally erupted during the 2013/14 crisis. Euromaidan has become a manifestation of Western and Central Ukraine discontent, while the Crimean protests and Donbass uprising proved to be an efficient counteraction in defense of the separate identity of the East. Of course, there would not be any uprising, if there was not a Russian military operation in Crimea, which gave heart to and encouraged the rebels, obviously supported by Federation's troops. However, there would not be any crisis at all, if Ukraine had not been so internally divided. Therefore, this profound domestic rivalry is one of the driving forces behind this war. It is not the first time in history, when such contradictory cultures, as well as ideological and political ambitions could not coexist peacefully within one state.

LAYER TWO: LONG-TERM REGIONAL RIVALRY

As previously mentioned, the history of Ukraine for many centuries was determined by intense competition between Poland (the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) and Russia (the Soviet Union). Starting in the Middle Ages, Poles colonized key areas, while

Moscow showed growing ambitions to unite all principalities formerly under the control of Kievan Rus.⁴⁵ These tendencies were even more apparent during the interwar period (1918-1939), as both Poles and Bolsheviks perceived Ukraine as a strategic area for their foreign policy goals. Soviets sought to conquer the entirety of Ukraine, as it was another step towards worldwide communist revolution, whereas the Polish political elite considered Ukraine as an important buffer zone separating Warsaw from Bolshevik Russia.⁴⁶ Additionally, many decision-makers in Poland believed that Russia without Ukraine would cease to be a great power. Decades later this idea was brought back by Zbigniew Brzezinski.⁴⁷ Despite the short-lived cooperation between Polish and Ukrainian leaders – Józef Piłsudski and Symon Petlura – during the war against the Bolsheviks, Ukraine was divided between Warsaw and Moscow.⁴⁸ This situation changed in 1939, when the Soviet Union used Polish control over Lviv as one of the reasons to invade on September 17th 1939.

This bilateral rivalry within Eastern Europe for several centuries naturally led to Ukrainian resistance. In the 20th century it manifested itself in a series of radical actions, notably, the previously mentioned genocide of Poles in Volhynia, committed by OUN, and the creation of SS Galizien troops, responsible for numerous atrocities against the civilian population.⁴⁹ Interestingly, since the beginning of the post-Cold War era this difficult historical legacy has had little effect on relations between all three nations, whereas the competition has continued. From Warsaw's perspective, despite natural anxiety concerning radical nationalist movements, independent Ukraine was perceived as an efficient remedy for the Kremlin's political and military domination in Central and Eastern Europe. As Ryszard Zięba noted, Polish decision-makers hoped that the creation and maintenance of a sovereign Ukraine would be crucial in dismantling the Soviet Union and weakening its successor – Russia. They also feared that the incorporation of Ukraine by the Kremlin would lead to the reconstruction of its domination over Central and Eastern Europe. Therefore, they recognized a strong correlation between Polish national security and Ukrainian sovereignty. In this context, it is not surprising that Poland was the first country in the world to acknowledge the independence proclaimed in Kiev.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ N. Davies, *God's Playground. A History of Poland*, Vol. 1: *The Origins to 1795*, Oxford 2005, chap. 5; J. Paolantoni, 'Russian History: From the Early East Slavs to the Grand Duchy of Moscow', Global Research, 26 September 2012, at <<http://www.globalresearch.ca/russian-history-from-the-early-east-slavs-to-the-grand-duchy-of-moscow/5306142>>, 4 July 2015.

⁴⁶ A. Radziwiłł, W. Roszkowski, *Historia 1871-1939*, Warszawa 2001, pp. 191-192.

⁴⁷ See S. Fischer, 'La stratégie russe dans l'espace post-soviétique: entre *soft* et *hard* power. Le cas de l'Ukraine', *Commission Justice et Paix Analyses* (2012), p. 1.

⁴⁸ See for example: A. Kozłowski, 'Geopolityczne podłoże granicy pokoju ryskiego (marzec 1921)', *Studia Europejskie*, No. 4 (1999), pp. 135-141.

⁴⁹ See for example P.A. Rudling, "'They Defended Ukraine': The 14. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (Galizische Nr. 1) Revisited', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (2012), pp. 329-368, at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2012.705633>>.

⁵⁰ R. Zięba, *Główne kierunki polityki zagranicznej Polski po zimnej wojnie*, Warszawa 2010, pp. 190-191 (*Stosunki Międzynarodowe*).

In the following years Polish foreign policy aimed to maintain cordial relations with Ukraine. This could be seen in the constant support for its sovereignty, capitalist reforms and rapprochement with the West. Warsaw also attempted to prevent strengthened cooperation between Kiev and Moscow, which was evident especially during Leonid Kuchma's presidency.⁵¹ Poland, however, was not ready to sacrifice its European ambitions in order to formalize political and security ties with Ukraine, as it sometimes suggested (e.g. the so called "Kravchuk plan").⁵² This significantly weakened the efficiency of Poland's Eastern policy. Warsaw was interested in supporting a pro-integration policy with Kiev, although it failed to take advantage of many convenient occasions to bind Ukraine to the West.⁵³ In summary, during Leonid Kuchma's presidency the relations between Warsaw and Kiev were generally good, but there were few tangible results, consistent with Polish national interests.

This lack of progress was beneficial for Russia, who was interested in maintaining strong influence over Kiev, as it was considered one of the most important factors to maintaining domination in the "Near Neighborhood" area. Post-Soviet states, including Ukraine, are perceived by the Kremlin as a sphere of vital national interests, despite the fact that the political situation after 1991 has significantly changed.⁵⁴ According to many political leaders in Moscow, this influence was crucial, not only in relations with the West, but it also had a huge impact on the fate of domestic reforms.⁵⁵ The "Near Neighborhood" policy towards the whole Post-Soviet region traditionally included such initiatives as: integration attempts, security and economic cooperation, prevention of strategic weapons proliferation, containment of the Western presence, and the protection of Russian-speaking minorities. The minimum goal of this policy, according to Kremlin decision-makers, required that all the former Soviet republics should maintain a friendly, or at least a neutral attitude, towards Moscow.⁵⁶ Therefore, since 1991 they have strongly opposed any ideas which could bind Ukraine to Western political, military, and economic structures such as the European Union or NATO. Additionally, even Central European states' membership in NATO was identified by Moscow as

⁵¹ K. Czornik, 'Miejsce Ukrainy w polskiej polityce zagranicznej po "pomarańczowej rewolucji". Próba bilansu' in M. Stolarczyk (ed.), *Stosunki Polski z sąsiadami w pierwszej dekadzie XXI wieku*, Katowice 2011, pp. 113-115 (*Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Śląskiego w Katowicach*, 2848).

⁵² See *To Strengthen Regional Security in Central and Eastern Europe: Initiative of Ukraine*, Embassy of Ukraine, Warsaw, Press Release, No. 3 (April 1999).

⁵³ O. Pavliuk, 'The Ukrainian-Polish Strategic Partnership and Central European Geopolitics' in K.R. Spillman, A. Wenger, D. Muller (eds.), *Between Russia and the West...*, p. 198.

⁵⁴ M. Laruelle, 'La question des Russes du proche-étranger en Russie (1991-2006)', *Les Études du CERI*, No. 126 (2006); F. Charillon (ed.), 'La crise ukrainienne vue par les chercheurs', *Note de recherche stratégique*, No. 6 (2014), pp. 20-21; A. Bryc, *Rosja w XXI wieku. Gracz światowy czy koniec gry?*, Warszawa 2009, pp. 51-52 (*Stosunki Międzynarodowe*).

⁵⁵ S. Bieleń, *Tożsamość międzynarodowa Federacji Rosyjskiej*, Warszawa 2006, p. 232.

⁵⁶ I. Topolski, *Polityka Federacji Rosyjskiej wobec państw Europy Wschodniej*, Lublin 2013, pp. 94-95; J.Ch. Romer, 'La politique étrangère russe sous Boris Eltsine' in S. Sur (ed.), *Annuaire Français de Relations Internationales*, Vol. 2, Bruylant 2001, pp. 54-55.

a great threat to Russian national security in the 1990s.⁵⁷ In this context, it is interesting to note that paradoxically it was not just Warsaw that perceived Ukraine as a buffer zone with Russia. Simultaneously the Kremlin wanted to keep NATO borders as far away as possible. Ukraine was, therefore perceived as the “last line of resistance” against accelerating American expansion eastwards.

It became crystal clear that Polish and Russian interests in Ukraine at the turn of the 21st century were completely contradictory. For a long time Moscow had held an upper hand in this competition. Kiev, discouraged by a lack of progress on the Western vector, frequently sought new opportunities to cooperate with Moscow, especially when it came to energy and military industries. Moreover, the Kremlin's capabilities to influence the course of events in Ukraine were much more potent than Poland's. As Santiago Fischer stressed, Moscow used both soft and hard power instruments. Hard power tools concerned mostly gas exports. Soft power, on the other hand, concentrated on multidimensional social and cultural activities.⁵⁸ These were usually unavailable for Poland.

Surprisingly, this situation which was hugely convenient for Moscow, changed drastically during the Orange Revolution in 2004. Presidential election frauds caused widespread popular protests, which transformed into a movement demanding in depth structural reforms, the introduction of democratic mechanisms, freedom of speech, European integration and the re-evaluation of relations with Russia. All these hopes focused on popular support for Viktor Yushchenko. As mentioned above, protests were carried out mostly by citizens from the Central and Western part of the country, while Donbass remained reluctant and manifested its support for Viktor Yanukovich. These domestic tensions were identified in Warsaw as a great opportunity to regain influence in Ukraine at Russia's expense. Many Polish politicians, led by President Aleksander Kwaśniewski and former President Lech Wałęsa, engaged themselves in negotiations between the conflicted sides. It resulted in huge success both for the revolutionaries and Polish decision-makers.⁵⁹

The transition of power in Kiev proved to be a period of tremendous unease for the political situation in Central and Eastern Europe. From the Ukrainian perspective, the Yushchenko presidency was a chance for Kiev to introduce necessary reforms and begin its march towards Europe. It was also a chance for a more independent and well-balanced foreign policy.

In Poland, the 2004 revolution was considered to be a serious political achievement. It was the first time in the post-Cold War era that Warsaw had outplayed Russia in Ukraine, supposedly gaining political leverage in Kiev. Subsequently Polish decision-makers attempted to enter into multidimensional strategic cooperation with Ukraine, and thereby to create the long-desired buffer zone between Central Europe and Russia.

⁵⁷ I. Facon, ‘La politique européenne de la Russie: ambitions anciennes, nouveaux enjeux,’ *Questions européennes*, No. 15 (2005), pp. 2-3.

⁵⁸ S. Fischer, ‘La stratégie russe...’

⁵⁹ See M. Ziółkowski, *Projekt...*

Warsaw supported Ukraine's membership in NATO/EU and tried to help Kiev during several gas crises, created by Moscow. Moreover, both states coordinated their actions during the war in the Caucasus. These attempts, however, despite some symbolic developments proved to be futile, mostly due to the aforementioned intensifying divisions between the former opposition leaders.⁶⁰

In Moscow, the fall of Kuchma and Yanukovych was considered a serious blow for the "Near Neighborhood" policy, a threat to its Black Sea interests, and an embarrassing setback in its long-term rivalry with the European Union/NATO, this time personified by Poland. The loss of influence over Kiev indicated that Russia would have problems in prolonging use of the naval base in Sevastopol, which holds strategic importance for the Federation's activities in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. The attitude of Yushchenko towards the Kremlin suggested that Russian military presence in Crimea would not be welcomed by Kiev in future.⁶¹ Furthermore, the new president began to make advances towards NATO, which was perceived in Moscow as a threat to the stability of the whole region. Finally, the defeat in Kiev, suffered mostly at the hands of Polish and Western European politicians supporting the revolution, angered Vladimir Putin. In effect, he initiated multiple symbolic actions aimed to punish Poland for its activities in 2004. Among others one can mention: statements supporting the controversial Yalta agreements, the establishment of a national holiday commemorating the expulsion of Poles from Cremlin in 1612, and an embargo on Polish meat imports.⁶²

Thus, the Orange Revolution was an example of intensifying regional rivalry over Ukraine. The success of Warsaw was far-reaching, but it quickly became apparent that it failed to realize the hoped objectives, as the internal situation in Ukraine was becoming increasingly instable. In effect, both Polish expectations and Russian fears never came to fruition during Yushchenko's presidency. Kiev despite being more pro-European, than pro-Russian, did not achieve any progress with regards to integration with the West.

It should be noted that at this time Russia did not resort to any military activity in order to prevent the negative repercussions of the revolution. Instead the Kremlin chose to maintain constant pressure on Kiev through multiple political and economic means, such as gas supply disruptions or trade restrictions.⁶³ Russian decision-makers rightly believed that it would contribute to the increasing internal crisis in Ukraine under the rule of former oppositionists. In effect, in 2010 the situation reverted as Victor Yanukovych took power in Ukraine, nullifying most of the negative consequences of the Orange Revolution for Moscow. The most significant manifestation of another political transition was the extension of the Sevastopol naval base lease. Meanwhile, Po-

⁶⁰ R. Zięba, *Główne kierunki...*, pp. 195-224.

⁶¹ A. Cooley, V. Dubovyk, 'Will Sevastopol Survive? The Triangular Politics of Russia's Naval Base in Crimea', *PONARS Euroasia Policy Memo*, No. 47 (December 2008).

⁶² R. Zięba, *Główne kierunki...*, pp. 183-184.

⁶³ B. Nygren, *The Rebuilding of Greater Russia. Putin's Foreign Policy towards the CIS Countries*, New York 2008, pp. 59-62 (*Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series*).

land had partially lost interest in strengthening relations with Ukraine, as the presidency of Yushchenko was widely considered to be a major disappointment. From Warsaw's perspective the renewed strategic cooperation was generally fruitless.⁶⁴

Therefore, from 2010 the "honeymoon period" in Polish-Ukrainian relations ended. Afterwards the relation were still, generally, good, but lacked the drive which was introduced immediately after the Orange Revolution. Instead, Yanukovych preferred to maintain good relations with Russia, while continuing preparations to associate Ukraine with the European Union. Thus, for several years regional rivalry over Ukraine became less intense, due to Warsaw's disinterest and the Kremlin's renewed position.

This situation significantly changed during the Euromaidan riots. Russians perceived them as an attempted *coup d'état*, prepared by radicals related to the former OUN.⁶⁵ From the Kremlin's perspective, protests once again intended to detach Ukraine from the Russian sphere of influence. This time, however, the Kremlin made use of a wide range of options, tested during Georgian and Syrian crises.

The deteriorating internal situation in Ukraine was a great opportunity for Poland, which was still interested in severing the country from the Russian influence. This interest was highlighted by the events which followed. In contrary to the Orange Revolution, this time direct European involvement in support of the protests was much smaller, although many Polish politicians, such as Jarosław Kaczyński, traveled to Kiev to demonstrate their support and positive attitude towards the introduction of necessary reforms. As the situation aggravated, Polish diplomats, along with French and German ones, decided to have a greater role in the crisis. This, however, proved to be futile, as the agreement witnessed by Radosław Sikorski, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, and Laurent Fabius was broken.⁶⁶

During the whole crisis in Ukraine, including the invasion of Crimea and the Donbass conflict, there were multiple examples of regional competition between Russia and some Central European states, spear-headed by Poland. To begin with, Polish authorities chose to recognize Arsenij Yatsenyuk's government, despite the violation of the February 21st agreement. Secondly, Poland strongly criticized the Kremlin's reaction to the fall of Yanukovych. The following military activities in Crimea were perceived in Warsaw as a clear infringement of fundamental international standards. The Prime Minister of Poland, Donald Tusk, in one of his statements stressed that there was a dire need for increased pressure from the whole international community on Russia in order to maintain the territorial integrity of Ukraine.⁶⁷ Thirdly, in August 2014, the Pol-

⁶⁴ R. Zięba, *Główne kierunki...*, pp. 220-224.

⁶⁵ O. Haran, 'Don't Believe the Russian Propaganda about Ukraine's "Fascist" Protesters', *The Guardian*, 13 March 2014, at <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/13/russian-propaganda-ukraine-fascist-protesters-euromaidan>>, 8 July 2015.

⁶⁶ M. Menkiszak, 'The Russian-Ukrainian War and European Security', *Nordika Programme Note*, No. 19 (2014), p. 2.

⁶⁷ 'Tusk: kwestia Krymu i integralności Ukrainy staje się paląca', TVN24, 27 February 2014, at <<http://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-ze-swiata,2/tusk-kwestia-krymu-i-integralnosci-ukrainy-staje-sie-palaca,402683.html>>, 10 July 2015.

ish Ministry of Defense decided to send 320 tons of humanitarian aid to Ukrainian soldiers. At the same time, domestic media started to speculate about the possibility of exporting offensive weapons to Kiev.⁶⁸ Fourthly, due to many bottom-up initiatives, some Polish associations gathered and sent various military equipment and humanitarian aid to the Ukrainian army and public. Among others, in September 2014 one organization transferred 8 off-road vehicles along with financial assets to Maidan Self-Defence troops.⁶⁹ Meanwhile the Ukrainian National Guard and special militia units obtained 2000 Polish-made bulletproof vests and about 6000 helmets.⁷⁰ It was a clear sign that Poland supported the Ukrainian government in its battle with Russia over the control of Donbass. Warsaw, however, despite the potential benefits, did not decide to provide Kiev with advanced offensive weaponry. Polish decision-makers were generally afraid to repeat the same mistake which was committed before the war in Georgia in August 2008.⁷¹ Fifthly, it must be noted that Warsaw decided to support militarily other NATO members who felt endangered by the crisis. In May 2014 Poland agreed to sell GROM MANPADS to Lithuania, which was an obvious move to counter the notorious Russian military drills.⁷² Sixthly, in October 2014 a spy scandal broke out, as two Poles spying for Russia were arrested by security services. Following this event, Warsaw expelled four Russian diplomats, which were said to be involved in hostile intelligence operations.⁷³ Finally, Polish political leaders indicated multiple times that since the beginning of the crisis Russia was perceived as a serious threat for national

⁶⁸ 'MON wspiera ukraińskich żołnierzy', *Newsweek.pl*, 27 August 2014, at <<http://polska.newsweek.pl/pomoc-humanitarna-dla-ukrainy-mon-newsweek-pl,artykuly,346508,1.html>>, 10 July 2015.

⁶⁹ 'Polski konwój z pomocą dotarł do stolicy Ukrainy', *Dziennik.pl*, 13 September 2014, at <<http://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/swiat/artykuly/469591,polski-konwoj-z-pomoca-juz-w-kijowie.html>>, 9 July 2015.

⁷⁰ 'Ukraińskie oddziały dostały polskie kamizelki kuloodporne i helmy', *TVN24*, 5 July 2014, at <<http://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-ze-swiate,2/ukrainskie-oddzialy-dostaly-polskie-kamizelki-kuloodporne-i-helmy,446643.html>>, 12 July 2015.

⁷¹ Before this conflict, Poland had exported to Georgia advanced MANPADS GROM, which were abandoned by Georgian soldiers and taken over by Russia. Two months later, they were "accidentally" found in a Chechen terrorist weapon stash in The Caucasus, which was rightly considered as a provocation prepared by the Kremlin. In Warsaw this fake scandal was understood as a warning to not sell weapons to the enemies of Russia. What is even more interesting, the same Polish GROM MANPADS were discovered in Eastern Ukraine. They were seized from pro-Russian separatists by the Ukrainian army. As Nicholas de Larrinaga from IHS Jane's Defence Weekly commented, there were likely the same weapons that were lost in Georgia. See '2 Gromy znaleziono w Czeczenii', *Altair Agencja Lotnicza*, 22 October 2008, at <http://www.altair.com.pl/news/view?news_id=1860>, 12 July 2015; N. de Larrinaga, 'Polish Grom MANPADS Appear in East Ukraine Conflict', *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, 20 May 2014, at <<http://www.janes.com/article/38053/polish-grom-manpads-appear-in-east-ukraine-conflict>>, 14 July 2015.

⁷² J. Sabak, 'Litwa zbiori się w Polsce. Wilno kupuje Gromy', *Defence24*, 26 May 2014, at <http://www.defence24.pl/news_litwa-zbiori-sie-w-polsce-wilno-kupuje-gromy>, 14 July 2015.

⁷³ 'Rosja wydalila kilku polskich dyplomatów', *Polska Agencja Prasowa*, 17 November 2014, at <http://www.pap.pl/palio/html.run?_Instance=cms_www.pap.pl&_PageID=1&s=infopakiet&dz=-swiat&idNewsComp=&filename=&idnews=188305&data=&status=biezace&_Checksum=1411095893>, 15 July 2015.

security. General Stanisław Koziej, head of the Polish National Security Bureau (BBN) stated in November 2014 that *We don't treat Russia as an enemy [...] For us Russia is a huge challenge, creating the risk of threats [...] We talk about aggression below the threshold of regular war.*⁷⁴ This was demonstrated by the new National Security Strategy of Poland, published in November 2014, which contains the following statements: *In the vicinity of Poland there is a risk of regional or local conflicts, which could involve her indirectly or directly. Poland is also not free from the forms of political pressure using military arguments [...] Relations between Russia and the West will remain an important factor influencing the security of Poland, the region and Europe.*⁷⁵

In turn, Russia's activities aimed to undermine the confidence and security of Central European countries. The Kremlin made multiple ostentatious gestures which were intended to discourage NATO countries in the region. Firstly, it imposed an embargo on Polish fruit and vegetables, which is a traditional method for Moscow's to "punish" Warsaw for unruly Eastern policy.⁷⁶ Secondly, Vladimir Putin raised a sensitive historical argument concerning bilateral relations, stating that there was nothing wrong with the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. Additionally, on September 17th 1939, according to him, Poland *had got what it deserved.*⁷⁷ Surprisingly, this statement was received relatively calmly in Warsaw, due to experiencing similar provocations in the past. Thirdly, Russia started an intensive campaign of military provocation, notably aircraft incursions and military drills near the borders of Poland and the Baltic states. They were mostly aimed at testing NATO defense systems, as well as creating an atmosphere of fear especially among Central European societies.⁷⁸ Fourthly, Russian media began a massive campaign of accusations against Poland. For example, they claimed that Polish mercenaries and arms "flooded" Ukraine. Many Russian mainstream journalists emphasized that Poles were training Right Sector troops and participated in the Donbass clashes.⁷⁹ Fifthly, the political elite in Moscow frequently slammed Poland for its constant support of the Yatsenyuk government. For example, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy warned Warsaw, and other Baltic countries, that they will be "smashed" for their in-

⁷⁴ 'Gen. Koziej: Rosja nie jest wrogiem, ale ogromnym wyzwaniem stwarzającym ryzyko zagrożeń', TVP.info, 5 November 2014, at <<http://www.tvp.info/17535331/gen-koziej-rosja-nie-jest-wrogiem-ale-ogromnym-wyzwaniem-stwarzajacym-ryzyko-zagrozen>>, 15 July 2015.

⁷⁵ *Strategia Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, Biuro Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego RP, Warszawa 2014, pp. 20-22.

⁷⁶ 'Rosja nakłada embargo na polskie warzywa i owoce', RMF24, 30 July 2014, at <<http://www.rmfm24.pl/raport-ukraina/fakty/news-rosja-naklada-embargo-na-polskie-warzywa-i-owoce,nId,1477035>>, 15 July 2015.

⁷⁷ 'Putin – what Was Wrong with Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact?', Radio Poland, 7 November 2014, at <<http://www.thenews.pl/1/10/Artykul/186605,Putin-%E2%80%93-what-was-wrong-with-MolotovRibbentrop-Pact>>, 15 July 2015.

⁷⁸ See for example: Th. Frear, Ł. Kulesa, I. Kearns, 'Dangerous Brinkmanship: Close Military Encounters Between Russia and the West in 2014', *European Leadership Network Policy Brief* (November 2014).

⁷⁹ See N. Malishevsky, 'Polish Mercenaries and Army Flood into Ukraine as Media Looks the Other Way', *Russia Insider*, 29 October 2014, at <http://russia-insider.com/en/politics_ukraine/2014/11/07/01-04-44pm/polish_mercenaries_and_army_flood_ukraine_media_looks_other>, 15 July 2015.

vovement in the crisis.⁸⁰ And finally, in November 2014 Russia expelled four Polish diplomats as retaliation for a similar action conducted by Poland due to the previously mentioned spy scandal.⁸¹

Rivalry between Poland and Russia over Ukraine in 2013/14 was of course only one aspect of the broader regional rivalry between EU/NATO countries and Moscow. Warsaw was the most evident rival of the Kremlin, however, other countries, notably Baltic states, also participated in rising tensions. They have kept a close eye on the events in Ukraine, due to their bad experiences with their own Russian minorities.⁸² These nations were regularly provoked by the Russian Federation's military, which had and has regularly violated their airspace. In the overall regional game for influence they were, however, insignificant as they have, effectively, no means to counter Russia's political and military pressure. Moreover, other Central European states, such as the Czech Republic or Slovakia did not participate as actively as the Baltic states and Poland in the Ukrainian crisis. Both have criticized Moscow for its policy, although these criticisms were somewhat insignificant in the overall course of events. Plus, their political stance is much more moderate than that of Poland.⁸³ Furthermore, Hungary isolated itself from the other Visegrad Group states, as the Orban government decided to adopt a friendly policy towards the Kremlin. It was illustrated by Budapest's demands to improve the situation of the Hungarian minority in the Zakarpattia Oblast.⁸⁴ This, along with other controversial moves by the Orban government – such as the suspension of gas exports to Ukraine – led to criticism from Western commentators and politicians. As Keith Johnson stressed, *Hungary is helping Putin keep his chokehold on Europe's energy*.⁸⁵ In other words, with regards to regional competition over Ukraine, Budapest has placed itself among Kremlin supporters.

Crisis in Ukraine proved to be just another chapter of the traditional centuries-long Polish-Russian rivalry in Eastern Europe.⁸⁶ Poland does not possess comparable capabilities to influence the course of events in Ukraine when compared to Russia, but

⁸⁰ K. Wajszczuk, 'Zhirinovskiy "Warns" Poland and Baltic States', *Warsaw Business Journal*, 12 August 2014, at <<http://wbj.pl/zhirinovskiy-warns-poland-and-baltic-states/>>, 15 July 2015.

⁸¹ 'Rosja wydalila...'

⁸² See S. Herzog, 'Revisiting the Estonian Cyber Attacks: Digital Threats and Multinational Responses', *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2011), at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.4.2.3>>.

⁸³ 'Czech and Slovak Views on Ukraine: More Timid than the Poles', *The Economist*, 6 March 2014, at <<http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2014/03/czech-and-slovak-views-ukraine>>, 15 July 2015.

⁸⁴ A. Sadecki, 'Hungary's Stance on the Ukrainian-Russian Conflict', OSW, 21 May 2014, at <<http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2014-05-21/hungarys-stance-ukrainian-russian-conflict>>, 15 July 2015.

⁸⁵ K. Johnson, 'Hungary Is Helping Putin Keep His Chokehold on Europe's Energy', *Foreign Policy*, 6 November 2014, at <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/11/06/hungary_is_helping_putin_keep_his_chokehold_on_europes_energy_south_stream_orban>, 15 July 2015.

⁸⁶ See S. Bieleń, 'Trudności w normalizacji stosunków polsko-rosyjskich' in K. Czornik, M. Lakomy, M. Stolarczyk (eds.), *Dylematy polityki zagranicznej Polski na początku XXI wieku*, Katowice 2014, pp. 285-300 (*Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Śląskiego w Katowicach*, 3227).

the outcome of the revolution was considered a success by the government in Warsaw. The satisfaction of the Polish political and intellectual elite is, however, not entirely justified. New authorities in Kiev sidelined Poland in recent international negotiations concerning the Donbass crisis, despite Polish ambitions to be part of them. Furthermore, the political elite in Central and Western Ukraine, being pro-European, at the same time show strong allegiance to Bandera's deeply anti-Polish legacy. It may be that Warsaw's support to the Euromaidan revolution will backfire, as some political scientists suggest.⁸⁷ The short-term success of Poland in the competition with Russia over Ukraine may result in long-term instability in Eastern Europe, when this success is combined with the domination of the Ukrainian elite, driven by a fundamentally anti-Polish ideology. Finally, due to the unresolved crisis, Polish aspirations to accelerate Ukrainian integration with the EU/NATO failed, so none of the traditional goals of Polish foreign policy on its Eastern border have so far been accomplished.

LAYER THREE: GLOBAL RIVALRY

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine can also be perceived through the lens of rising competition between two blocks of countries: the West, led by the United States, and Russia, supported by several other satellite states. The post-Cold War détente was generally short-lived as NATO countries exploited Moscow's weakness⁸⁸ by encroaching into its traditional zone of influence, notably Central Europe,⁸⁹ Balkans and the Caucasus.⁹⁰ Officially, bilateral relations between Moscow and Washington remained relatively warm, but in reality, the Kremlin maintained its ambitions to oppose American *hyperpuissance*.⁹¹ Most of the Russian political elite still perceived NATO as the only serious rival and possible enemy in the future. Unfortunately for them, at the time these political inclinations were impossible to act upon, as the state suffered deep structural crisis, evident not only in the economy, but also in the mili-

⁸⁷ See M. Stolarczyk, 'Dylematy bezpieczeństwa Polski...', pp. 41-87.

⁸⁸ It has to be noted that not all of NATO countries were interested in violating Russian interests in the 1990s. For instance, Germany and France usually attempted to include Moscow in most of security mechanisms in Europe. At the same time, however, they participated in many ventures, which were criticized by Kremlin, such as the intervention in Kosovo. See L. Declour, 'France-Russie: la réinvention d'une relation spécifique', *DGAP Analyse*, No. 6 (2010).

⁸⁹ Tensions over Central Europe concerned mostly the NATO/EU plans to move their borders eastwards. Russian *niet* on this issue was officially lifted in 1997, although Kremlin had still remained highly skeptical over the expansion of the Atlantic Alliance into the Post-Soviet area. See M. Kramer, 'NATO, the Baltic States and Russia: A Framework for Sustainable Enlargement', *International Affairs*, Vol. 78, No. 4 (2002), at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.00277>>.

⁹⁰ The rising rivalry concerned mostly the Azeri energetic resources, as well as political influence in the former Soviet republics, such as Georgia. See R.C. Nation, *Russia, the United States, and the Caucasus*, Carlisle 2007 (*US and Russia: Regional Security Issues and Interests*); M. Soltanifar, 'US-Russian Rivalry in the Caucasus. Towards a New Cold War?', *Global Dialogue*, Vol. 7, No. 3/4 (2005).

⁹¹ See Ph. Richardot, *Les États-Unis: Hyperpuissance militaire à l'aube du XXIe siècle*, Paris 2002.

tary and society in general.⁹² This was the reason why the Federation experienced a series of embarrassments, such as the first war in Chechnya. The pinnacle of this era of “humiliation” for Moscow came in 1999, during the NATO military intervention in Kosovo. As all attempts to block Western actions failed, the Kremlin experienced a serious blow for its influence in the international environment. It could not, however, act in a more determined manner, as the Federation was not in any shape to exacerbate relations with the West.

The situation started to change at the turn of the new century, mostly due to two reasons. Firstly, power in the Kremlin was seized by Vladimir Putin, who possessed a coherent plan to rebuild the privileged status of Russia in the international environment. This goal was strengthened by a popular desire to regain national pride which had been badly damaged during the Yeltsyn era. Putin’s strategy to reach this goal was initially based on three pillars: domestic stability and centralization of power, economic development and profound military reforms.⁹³ At the end of this road, Russia was once again supposed to be ready to begin competing with the West on equal terms and to defend its position on the geopolitical chessboard. After a decade these plans had generally succeeded as the table below proves. Putin had managed to secure stable economic development, which was a *sine qua non* requirement to even think about resuming the game for influence with the United States in all possible dimensions.

Table 1. Russia’s economic development 2000-2010

Year	GDP Growth in %	Central government debt in % of GDP	GDP per capita (current US dollars)
2000	10.0	–	1,772
2001	5.1	49.0	2,100
2002	4.7	41.4	2,373
2003	7.3	–	2,975
2004	7.2	–	4,109
2005	6.4	16.7	5,338
2006	8.2	9.9	6,948
2007	8.5	7.2	9,145

⁹² See for example: A. Shleifer, D. Treisman, ‘A Normal Country: Russia after Communism’, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2005), pp. 151-174, at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1257/0895330053147949>>.

⁹³ See P. Baker, ‘Putin Moves to Centralize Authority’, *The Washington Post*, 14 September 2004, at <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A17838-2004Sep13.html>>, 16 July 2015; V. Prokopenko, ‘Russian Federation: Financial System Stability Assessment’, *IMF Country Report*, No. 11/291 (September 2011); ‘Russia’s Military Modernisation: Putin’s New Model Army’, *The Economist*, 22 May 2014, at <<http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21602743-money-and-reform-have-given-russia-armed-forces-it-can-use-putins-new-model-army>>, 16 July 2015.

Year	GDP Growth in %	Central government dept in % of GDP	GDP per capita (current US dollars)
2008	5.2	6.5	11,700
2009	-7.8	8.7	8,616
2010	4.5	9.1	10,710

Source: *The World Bank Indicators*, at <<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator>>.

Secondly, at the same time, Moscow had become a valuable partner in the “war on terror,” especially in the context of the ISAF operation in Afghanistan.⁹⁴ Russian experience and influence in Central Asia appeared to be quite helpful for the United States in the battle against the Taliban. Therefore, relations between Russia and the West at the beginning of the 21st century were relatively good, despite some short-lived crises. Moscow’s international position was strengthened even more, as the West suffered a transatlantic crisis due to American intervention in Iraq. Some authors, such as Daniel Colard, even argued that this was the moment, when the new “axis” composed of Paris, Berlin, and Moscow was forged, due to their disagreement over the neoconservative militarism visible during the Iraqi intervention.⁹⁵ Despite the fact that the famous transatlantic rift⁹⁶ was brief and after several years relations between Europe and the United States warmed again, the Kremlin skillfully balanced itself on the cusp of inter-NATO differences, gaining time and space to regain essential resources necessary to enter into renewed rivalry with the West.

The turning point came in 2008, when Kosovo declared independence and was recognized by the majority of NATO members. For the Kremlin this act constituted clear proof that the West does not take Russia’s interests into account. Consequently this move was met with outrage, expressed by the Federation’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. In his statement in February 2008, he stressed that the recognition of the independence of Kosovo was a violation of international law. He also accused the West of applying double standards.⁹⁷ It corresponded with the infamous statement of Vladimir Putin: *The precedent of Kosovo is a terrible precedent, which will de facto destroy the whole system of international relations [...] They have not thought through the results of what they are doing. At the end of the day it is a two-ended stick and the second end will come back and hit them in the face.*⁹⁸

⁹⁴ M. Laruelle, ‘Russia’s Strategies in Afghanistan and their Consequences for NATO’, *NATO Research Paper*, No. 69 (November 2011).

⁹⁵ See D. Colard, ‘L’axe Paris-Berlin-Moscou. Le “camp de refus” dans la crise iraquienne (2002-2003)’ in S. Sur (ed.), *Annuaire Français de Relations Internationales*. 05, 2004, Bruxelles 2004.

⁹⁶ J.-P. Hébert, A. Ousman, ‘La déchirure transatlantique: Le Moyen-Orient, Pomme de discorde’ in J. Tercinet (ed.), *Les relations transatlantiques et l’environnement international*, Bruxelles 2005 (*Études Stratégiques Internationales*, 3).

⁹⁷ ‘Lavrov Makes Emotional Plea for Sanity over Kosovo Independence’, Sputnik International, 12 February 2008, at <<http://sputniknews.com/russia/20080212/99034248.html>>, 16 July 2015.

⁹⁸ ‘Putin: Kosovo Case Terrible Precedent’, Press TV, 22 February 2008, at <<http://edition.presstv.ir/detail/44275.html>>, 16 July 2015.

And it did six months later. War in Georgia in August 2008, in a certain sense, was a facsimile of the logic used by the West in 1999 in the Balkans. Russian military intervention brought American supporters in the Caucasus to their knees, shattering some of the White House's influence in the region.⁹⁹ The war with Georgia was also a final test on how the Kremlin could handle crises in the "Near Neighborhood" with regard to Western hostility. This test proved to be a great success due to a number of reasons. Firstly, Russia tested its military doctrine against a state supported by the USA, drawing lessons for future military reforms. Secondly, it allowed Russia to discourage many post-Soviet countries from cooperating with NATO/the EU and to weaken American influence in the Caucasus. And finally, despite the temporary crisis, NATO was quickly forced to resume close contacts with the Federation, mostly due to the situation in Afghanistan and the ambiguous attitude of Germany and France. Both of these countries distanced themselves from taking radical steps against Moscow.

From the geopolitical point of view, it was the first time in decades that had Russia triumphed over the West in the game for influence. Up until 2008, when American and Russian interests clashed, the Kremlin was usually forced to back down. This prestigious victory convinced the decision-makers in Moscow that a successful rivalry with the West is possible. It must be noted, however, that after 2008 Putin and Medvedev did not seek to antagonize the United States, cooperating with them, e.g. in the G-20 and in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁰ Later on this kind of policy was further illustrated by the agreement of Moscow to conduct NATO military operation against Muammar Qaddafi in Libya. Unfortunately this intervention proved to be another case where NATO countries used double standards. It raised legitimate concerns in Moscow, which criticized Atlantic Alliance for violating the UN Security Council resolution 1973.¹⁰¹ At the time, Russian strategy was founded on two basic principles: (1) to actively defend its zones of influence in the world, especially the "Near Neighborhood" area; (2) to slowly build a network of states skeptical towards Western dominance in the international environment. This was the reason why Moscow supported, for example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization development, BRICS cooperation, and were reluctant to cooperate with the EU/NATO on the Iranian atomic program. Such a strategy was, therefore, rather passive than active, as the Kremlin did not attempt to force out the West from its positions in Asia or Europe.

The second crucial moment took place in 2013 during the Syrian chemical crisis. Since the beginning of the civil war in this country, the Obama administration has sup-

⁹⁹ See G. Toal, 'Russia's Kosovo: A Critical Geopolitics of the August War over South Ossetia', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (2009); G. Hafkin, 'The Russo-Georgian War of 2008: Developing the Law of Unauthorized Humanitarian Intervention after Kosovo', *Boston University International Law Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2010).

¹⁰⁰ I. Oldberg, 'Russia's Great Power Strategy under Putin and Medvedev', *UI Occasional Papers*, No. 1 (2010), pp. 4-8.

¹⁰¹ NATO bent the resolution, as it supported only one side of the conflict, actively acting against Qaddafi regime. See 'Russia Accuses NATO of Going beyond UN Resolution on Libya', RT.com, 17 April 2011, at <<http://rt.com/news/russia-nato-un-resolution-libya/>>, 20 July 2015.

ported the rebels fighting against Bashar al Assad, one of the closest allies of the Kremlin in the Middle East. Officially, the American authorities perceived events in Syria as another chance to support democratic values in the region.¹⁰² For Moscow the idea of military intervention against Damascus, mentioned by Obama's administration after chemical attacks, constituted another serious threat to Russia's geopolitical position. In effect, it decided to conduct a serious military stand-off with the United States, which surprisingly ended in a huge success for the Kremlin. While the United States were getting ready to conduct airstrikes against al Assad forces, Vladimir Putin increased the Russian naval presence in the Mediterranean as a means to interrupt American plans, combined with valuable diplomatic activities. Eventually, Obama's plan failed.¹⁰³ Thus, from a geopolitical perspective, between 2008 and 2013 Russia successfully defended its positions in the Caucasus and the Middle East, while suffering less painful setbacks in Maghreb. At the time, American foreign policy looked increasingly ill-considered and inconsequential. Washington, which rightly recognized China as a major strategic rival, engaged itself in a multitude of unnecessary or harmful activities in the international environment, which resulted in the disruption of "rebalance" towards Asia, and an exacerbation of relations with Russia.¹⁰⁴ Russia, which could be a valuable partner in the fight against radical Islamism and Middle Eastern and African instability, but only if well-respected on the geopolitical chessboard.

In this context, the course of events in Ukraine since the end of 2013 can be perceived as just another phase of traditional American-Russian geopolitical rivalry. From the American standpoint, at least officially, this revolution should be supported as it would lead to democratic transition and the integration of Ukraine with the European Union. At the same time, it was, however, a major violation of the Russian sphere of influence, on a vector which held tertiary importance for U.S. national interests. In this context, Henry Kissinger was surely right when stating that *Ukraine has always had a special significance for Russia. It was a mistake not to realize it*.¹⁰⁵ The Russian position in Eastern Europe, if Ukraine was to become detached from its sphere of influence, would

¹⁰² Sh. Bar, 'The Syrian Crisis: In the Wake of Ghouta', *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2013), at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2013.11446562>>; B. Obama, 'Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa', The White House, 19 May 2011, at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>>, 20 July 2015.

¹⁰³ J. Rudnitsky, H. Meyer, 'Russia Boosts Mediterranean Force as U.S. Mulls Syria Strike', Bloomberg, 4 September 2013, at <<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-09-04/russia-boosts-mediterranean-flotilla-as-u-s-weighs-syria-strike.html>>, 20 July 2015.

¹⁰⁴ About the failures of the Obama's foreign policy see: M. O'Hanlon, 'Obama's Weak and Failing States Agenda', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2012), pp. 67-80, at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2012.725023>>; J. Kiwerska, 'Obama's Failure in the Middle East', *Bulletin of the Institute of Western Affairs*, No. 167 (2014); E.D. Borghard, *Arms and Influence in Syria. The Pitfalls of Greater U.S. Involvement*, Washington 2013 (CATO Institute Policy Analysis, No. 734).

¹⁰⁵ J. von Mittelstaedt, E. Follath, 'Do We Achieve War Order Through Chaos or Insight?' Interview with H. Kissinger, Spiegel Online, 13 November 2014, at <<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-henry-kissinger-on-state-of-global-politics-a-1002073.html>>, 20 July 2015.

be significantly weakened, as only Belarus would remain under the Kremlin's loosening control. Thus, from Vladimir Putin's perspective such a scenario was unthinkable and had to be prevented at all costs. As political means to prevent the revolution failed, this time the Kremlin decided to conduct a limited military operation. There were two general reasons for this aggression. Firstly, Putin believed in the increased capabilities of the Russian army and Russia's stable economy. Unlike during the Orange Revolution, when Russia had not yet fully emerged from the deep structural crisis of the Yeltsyn presidency, this time Moscow was aware of its strength due to several former successes in its rivalry with the West. Secondly, unlike the 2004/2005 events, this time Kiev had a very real opportunity to associate itself with, and later on, become a member of the European Union. Ukrainian accession to the EU in many aspects would, therefore, negate traditional Russian means to influence the internal situation in this country.

Most Western journalists, blogosphere pundits and political elite hold Vladimir Putin responsible for the outbreak of war in Donbass. It must be noted, however, that from the point of view of geopolitical rivalry since the end of the Cold War, it was the West that violated Russia's sphere of influence, not the other way around. Since its beginning, NATO members supported the revolution and agreed on the breach of the February 21st agreement, in spite of the awareness that it would lead to serious political, and perhaps also military repercussions in Eastern Europe. This was a serious mistake by the West. Instead of cooperating with Russia in order to stabilize the radicalizing Middle East, the United States, along with its Western European allies, chose to intrude into the "Near Neighborhood" area without any potential benefits. This situation was accurately depicted by John J. Mearsheimer, who is critical about Western policy towards Ukraine and Russia. According to him *The West's triple package of policies – NATO enlargement, EU expansion, and democracy promotion – added fuel to fire waiting for ignite. The spark came in November 2013.*¹⁰⁶ He has also compared these events to a hypothetical situation for the United States: *Imagine the outrage in Washington if China built an impressive military alliance and tried to include Canada and Mexico in it.*¹⁰⁷ This point of view must be taken serious, as the West had to expect what the outcome of its incursion in the Russian sphere of influence would be.¹⁰⁸ However, it still decided to provoke a response from the Kremlin. In effect, since the beginning of 2014 we have witnessed a "war on sanctions lists" between the West and Russia, combined with increased military tensions.¹⁰⁹

Thus, the "game of Ukraine" is clearly visible also on the geopolitical level. Since the end of the Cold War NATO and the EU expanded its borders eastwards which was

¹⁰⁶ J.J. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis...', p. 4.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁰⁸ Dmitri Trenin proposed an interesting explanation of this problem: *The U.S. approach toward Russia reflects traditional concerns, even phobias, and is not based on an adequate understanding of the country, in part because Russia has ceased to be a focus of U.S. foreign policy.* See D. Trenin, *The Ukraine Crisis...*, p. 1.

¹⁰⁹ F. Lukyanov, 'Russia's Asymmetrical Response: Global Aikido' in P.J. Saunders (ed.), *Costs of a New Cold War...*, p. 10; I. Yurgens, 'Targeted Sanctions With an Unclear Target' in P.J. Saunders (ed.), *Costs of a New Cold War...*

perceived in Moscow as a rising threat to its national security. Ukraine, being an essential buffer zone for the Kremlin, according to Vladimir Putin, cannot be under Western control, as it would constitute a threat to national security. Therefore, the war in Donbass since April 2014 can be perceived as another important chapter in the traditional geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West, composed of such events as the Kosovo intervention, the Georgia war, and the Syrian crisis. This was summarized by Dmitri Trenin, who stated that *Russia, feeling betrayed by its Western partners because of their support for regime change in Kiev, has stepped forward to protect its vital interests – which the West saw as aggression by a revisionist power.*¹¹⁰

CONCLUSION

The war in Ukraine, as proven by this paper, was sparked by multilayered and long-term rivalry over this country. The first layer consists of various internal, domestic tensions between different cultural, ethnic and religious groups which have contradictory political ambitions. Since the creation of independent Ukraine in 1991, these groups competed with one another over the fate and future of this country. This was the fundamental reason why the 2013/2014 crisis was even possible. The second layer concerns the long-term regional rivalry between Central European states and Moscow. Poland, especially, aimed to include Ukraine in the European integration process, as it was considered to be a beneficial move for its security. Additionally, most of the political elite believe that Russia bereft of Ukraine would be much weaker and could not harm Central Europe in any serious way. Finally, the third and most important layer concerns the global rivalry between the West, encroaching towards the Russian-dominated “Near Neighborhood,” and the Kremlin. Conflict in Ukraine proved to be just another chapter of this geopolitical game for influence. All these contradictory goals of a multitude of actors clashed at the same moment, contributing to the deteriorating situation in 2013/14. This, in effect, led to the eruption of military conflict.

In this context, it should also be noted that the military conflict in Donbass was caused by a series of mistakes committed by all interested parties, who, frequently, poorly assessed or underestimated the potential repercussions of their activities. This, in turn, meant the unexpected problems far outweighed the anticipated benefits. To begin with, the West once again encroached into the traditional Russian zone of influence, despite the fact that Ukraine is not of particular interest to NATO. Furthermore, the United States along with EU countries ignored multiple warnings from Vladimir Putin that the Kremlin will never agree to Ukraine’s membership in NATO/the EU.¹¹¹ In effect, Russia used violence in order to defend its strategic interests near its borders. It was a clear mistake to not expect this reaction at the beginning of the revolution. Moreover, Western ambitions to include Ukraine in European integration processes

¹¹⁰ D. Trenin, *The Ukraine Crisis...*, p. 1.

¹¹¹ J.J. Mearsheimer, ‘Why the Ukraine Crisis...’, p. 3.

have failed miserably. One cannot imagine Ukrainian accession to NATO or the EU in the foreseeable future. Thus, instead of expanding the space of freedom and democracy, the West has only contributed to the creation of another, completely unnecessary source of instability in the world.

This was also the case with Central European states, notably Poland, interested in creating a buffer zone between themselves and Russia. Due to these traditional ambitions it supported the Euromaidan protests from the beginning, expecting the accelerated association and integration of Ukraine with the EU, strategic cooperation with Kiev, and therefore, stability on its eastern border. Instead, the Russian Federation has resorted to political and economic sanctions against Warsaw, as well as increased military drills. Furthermore, Warsaw did not consider what the outcome of the rising popularity of Bandera's legacy among the new political elite in Kiev will be, which has sidelined Poland from international negotiations over Donbass. In spite of official cordiality, it is not a good prognostic for the future of bilateral relations between Poland and Ukraine.

Russia violated Ukraine's territorial integrity by conquering Crimea and supporting militarily the rebels in Donbass. For several months it seemed that the Kremlin had succeeded in preventing most of the foreseen negative consequences of the Euromaidan revolution. However, it seems as though Vladimir Putin has miscalculated the financial stability of the Federation, as it soon started to suffer from Western economic sanctions. Moreover, due to the aggressive policy of Putin, nowadays, it is hard to imagine that in the near future the whole of Ukraine could return to the Russian-dominated "Near Neighborhood." The only way which would ensure Moscow's influence in Ukraine would be federalization, including the pro-Russian Donbass region. So far, it seems that Kremlin decided to "freeze" the conflict, due to operation in Syria.

The biggest victim of the "game of Ukraine" is obviously Ukraine itself. Encouraged by the West to revolt, today it cannot count on any serious military or financial help from NATO/EU countries. Also, there is effectively no chance to become a member of either organization, as the former oppositionists hoped for. Thus, Kiev has been left alone, in need, and without any of the support it had expected, facing a foe surpassing it every field. Domestically, the situation is even worse, as all the aforementioned conflicting tendencies caused a rupture, which will be almost impossible to repair. Furthermore, the crisis fosters the radicalization of the society, as the rising popularity of nationalist groups prove. This may have negative consequences for the stability of the political system. Finally, the wealthiest region of Ukraine has turned into a battlefield. As there are little chances that the conflict will be settled quickly, Donbass will remain a bleeding wound for Ukraine, preventing strategic decisions both domestically and internationally.

Finally, the war in Ukraine is harmful for the whole international community. Fortunately, those who argue that we are witnessing the eve of a new Cold War are wrong, as there is no ideological factor at play in relations between major actors on the geopolitical chessboard. The contemporary situation is much more similar to the traditional great power rivalry of the 19th century. Paradoxically, this is a positive factor, as ideology will

not prevent the reconciliation between the competing sides in future. Hopefully, both the West and Russia will soon understand that it is in their interest to cooperate with each other. It is due to the fact that the current situation draws attention and resources from much more important threats emerging in the Middle East, Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa. The creation of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, civil war in Libya, the emerging phenomenon of micro-terrorism, as well as multiple crises in Africa (Central African Republic, Nigeria, South Sudan) cannot be addressed efficiently while the Ukrainian crisis is still not solved. Only consistent cooperation between the West, Russia, China and other regional powers will be an efficient answer to the deteriorating security situation in the world. Therefore, after a series of mistakes and a period of increased rivalry, it is in the interest of all sides to settle the Donbass crisis as soon as possible.

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