CENTRAL ASIA
the forgotten region?
Opinion & Analysis

7 The new Great Game that is not
Filippo Costa Buranelli
The idea that Central Asia is the nexus of a Great Game between the world’s superpowers is largely exaggerated. Undoubtedly, the Central Asian republics are actively engaging with the great powers by relying on their sovereign prerogatives and pursuing their own strategic goals. But this should be seen rather as a strategy of the local players than a competitive game orchestrated from Washington, Moscow or Beijing.

15 The self-made Apaches of Kyrgyzstan
A photo-report by Magdalena Borowiec

25 How Central Asia understands democracy
Mariya Y. Omelicheva
Since gaining independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the republics of Central Asia have undergone a diverse process of nation and state building. However, some common threads in Central Asia have emerged, including a unique understanding of the concept of democracy.

31 Central Asia and water.
No time left for squabbles
Peter Leonard
A combination of rapid population growth and climate change, which some believe may lead to the vanishing of much of the region’s river-feeding glaciers within the next half century, is going to pose the greatest challenge Central Asia has ever confronted in its history.

38 The complex reality of radicalisation in Central Asia
An interview with Bhavna Davé

43 The crawling threat of the Crimea scenario
Naubet Bisenov
Following the annexation of Crimea, the fear that Kazakhstan’s ethnic Russian regions might share the peninsula’s fate has returned.

49 A looming humanitarian crisis in the land Orwell forgot
Christopher Schwartz

56 In search of the enemies of the state
Anna Cieślewska

62 Putin and his monsters
Artem Filatov
The Russian president is flipping the switch after 17 years in office. At the start of the new presidential campaign Vladimir Putin has already attempted to gain the sympathies of the younger generation, but avoids facing the worrying reality created by his system.

68 The Kremlin sets its eyes on YouTube
Svitlana Ovcharova

75 Central Europe is more vulnerable than it appears
Péter Krekó, Edit Zgut and Lóránt Győri

83 The rebranding of Jobbik
Dominik Héjj
The far right party Jobbik plays a significant role in Hungary’s political system. It now has its sights on the 2018 parliamentary elections and has indicated its plans to be a serious challenger to Viktor Orbán.

91 Is it too early to speak about justice in Donbas?
Gerhard Kemp and Igor Lyubashenko

98 Visas for Georgians are not enough
Mateusz Kubiak

103 The curse and miracle of Kupiškis
Emil Staulund Larsen and Noah Groves
### Interviews

110  **Russia is unprepared for the next world order**  
*An interview with Bobo Lo*  
"Without change, Russia will struggle in a globalised world where trade transcends sovereignty, where threats of global pandemics are on the rise, where climate change is accelerating and where the ubiquity and multiplicity of information make it virtually impossible to control."

### History & Memory

116  **How Russia interprets 1917**  
*Nikita Petrov*  
The question of revolution, particularly the “colour revolution”, is something that fills the Kremlin with fear and paranoia. This is how attitudes towards 1917 are now being shaped.

### Reports

122  **Stories from Russia’s coal country**  
*Giovanni Pigni*

129  **The curse of Ján Ľupták’s duck**  
*Dariusz Kałan*

### Eastern Café

146  **The disintegration train has left Brussels**  
*Iwona Reichardt*

150  **Putin’s long awaited opportunity, retaliation and revenge**  
*Ostap Kushnir*

155  **Cultural diplomacy at its best**  
*Dorota Sieroń-Galusek*

160  **Legnica with a view to Russia**  
*Grzegorz Żurawiński*

### Poles and Czechs across generations

166  **The Czech paradox**  
*Aleksander Kaczorowski*  
Czechs are by definition more western and European (although not necessarily pro-European), more democratic, more liberal, wealthier and more emancipated than other Central Europeans. This megalomania, to a great extent, contributed to the success of the Czech transformation. Yet, these advantages also represent a paradox of the Czech myth.

171  **At peace with ourselves**  
*An interview with Martin Palouš*

175  **Millennials versus statistics**  
*Kinga Motyka*

180  **Czech-Polish relations. Past and future**  
*Vít Dostál*

184  **Nothing has really changed**  
*Miroslav Pech*

187  **A friendship that bore fruit**  
*An interview with Mirosław Jasiński*
Putin’s long awaited opportunity, retaliation and revenge

OSTAP KUSHNIR

Putin’s War against Ukraine: Revolution, nationalism and crime. By: Taras Kuzio. Publisher: CreateSpace Independent, in association with the Chair of Ukrainian Studies, University of Toronto, 2017.

When I first met Taras Kuzio during the Three Revolutions Symposium at the College of Europe’s Natolin Campus in Warsaw, I was impressed by his academic engagement. It was clear that he had given much thought to issues about Ukraine over the last 25 years, and while listening to the other speakers during the symposium, Kuzio illustrated his ability to assess key messages and I observed how he caught the most important arguments. His most recent book, Putin’s War against Ukraine: Revolution, nationalism and crime, reflects Kuzio’s approach to research. It is suggestive of a mosaic of condensed facts, arguments and judgments – each of which contributes to a multi-dimensional picture.

The title clearly reflects the content of the book. It is about Vladimir Putin, war and Ukraine, from a variety of perspectives. Kuzio particularly scrutinises the concept of Putin’s Russia, with emphasis on his personality and close advisors. The war is presented in its “hybrid” diversity: from the invisible invasion of Crimea by the “little green men”, to Kyiv’s response by means of its so-called Anti-Terrorist Operation. Kuz-
io’s pro-Ukrainian position is clearly visible throughout. He presents Ukraine as a state, idea, phenomenon and geopolitical unit of people and regions; Donbas and Crimea are specifically emphasised in this regard.

**Old-new narratives**

Kuzio writes that the idea of the book emerged already mid-way through Viktor Yanukovych’s presidential term. Kuzio and his colleagues from the Ukrainian Studies Fund (US) and the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies concluded that the Donbas region was overlooked or, at best, misinterpreted by western political scientists. Donbas had resided outside of the so-called “Ukrainian imagined community” and was often simplified in academic research on Ukraine. Thus, Kuzio and his colleagues decided to fill in these gaps in the western academic discourse. A large part of the research took place when the author travelled to Donbas after the war broke out in 2014 and interviewed people on the ground.

*Putin’s War against Ukraine* is well structured and entails a sound methodology, consistent narration and refined language. Kuzio provides well-researched arguments taken from both academic and media sources. The style keeps the reader engaged and while familiarity with the issues is helpful in navigating Kuzio’s text, it is not ultimately required to understand the book.

Kuzio’s background on the topic allows him to be reflective, innovative and critical. Those familiar with his writing know that he is not afraid to express himself in black-and-white terms, whether appropriate or not. He has not been afraid to voice his criticism of other researchers who appear to be pushing a much more pro-Russian narrative. For example, he has harshly critiqued the University of Kent’s Richard Sakwa for being over-dependent on Russian sources and has blamed Alexander Dugin for constructing the master strategy for the ongoing Russian offensive in the region.

Those familiar with Taras Kuzio know that he is not afraid to express himself in black-and-white terms, whether appropriate or not.
may encounter in previous Kuzio texts. This includes the dichotomy between ethnic and civic nationalisms in Ukraine, the inalienable xenophobic nature of the Russian contemporary worldview, the expansionist features of Russian nationalism, the mythologisation of undefeated fascism everywhere outside Russia and the nature of the Ukrainian question in Russia. This time, however, the “traditional” concepts and leitmotifs are raised to a higher theoretical level, beyond what he typically publishes in the international press.

Identity conflict

Ukraine is portrayed by Kuzio through contrasts and comparisons to Russia. The author specifically emphasises the historical experience of both nations which projects itself on the functioning of state and civic institutions. The emphasis on Russia and its flaws, as he sees them, is very noticeable. In fact the chapter on Russia opens the book. It is also the largest and most “condensed” in terms of arguments. Kuzio spends a lot of time reflecting on the nature of contemporary Russian nationalism and scrutinises its origins. The evolution of Russian “rigid” nationalism in the post-Cold War era as well as the contribution of Putin and his closest advisors to this process permeates all his Russia-related narratives.

In turn, Ukraine is portrayed as a state with numerous opportunities that are, however, predominantly wasted due to the ambiguity of Ukrainian identities. The struggle between pro-western aspirations and pro-Soviet nostalgia hangs in the background of the nebulous search for national uniqueness – this is what makes Ukrainian political life uneven and turbulent. And it also provides the Kremlin with functional leverage to meddle in Ukrainian affairs.

Speaking specifically about Donbas, Kuzio portrays it as an obscure and dark place. The region’s development can be compared to the development of Australia under the British Crown in the 19th century: convicts from throughout Russia and later the Soviet Union were relocated there. Kuzio notes that as many as 3.5 million ex-prisoners and luck seekers settled in Donbas after the Second World War. In some ways, the habits and culture they brought there continue to predefine interpersonal and social relations: human life is of comparatively low value and imprisonment is nothing to be ashamed of. Apart from this, Kuzio portrays Donbas as a region of geopolitical significance, which makes it unique, robust and volatile. Since the 1990s Donbas has always attempted and struggled to live between Kyiv and Moscow without being truly committed to any of the sides. Nostalgia for the “prosperous” Soviet past, weak support for the Ukrainian present, sympathy for a Russia-led future and high tolerance to crime are
the characteristics of Donbas from the author’s perspective.

According to Kuzio, residents of Donbas favour paternalism. They are keen to support any political leader who compliments them and offers simple answers to complicated questions. They believe in the myths of the Soviet times when Donbas was shining in a glory of a perpetual locomotive of progress. In 2014 they were convinced that it was their region which contributed the most to Ukraine’s prosperity – which was not the case. Paradoxically, having that self-esteem, a majority of the local people remained politically passive. This indirectly allowed the paternalist Party of Regions and its oligarchs to build their stronghold in Donbas.

Based on the interviews he conducted there, Kuzio profoundly describes the criminal culture of Donbas. He argues that this culture has contributed to the success of Russia’s intervention and prepared the ground for the spread of propaganda and enforcement of certain values. Criminal networks not only ignited the spirit of the so-called local separatists, but introduced a “controlled chaos” – at least at the very beginning of the conflict – which was expected to conceal the re-distribution of property.

While this black-and-white portrayal of Donbas is one of the main ambiguous points of the book, Kuzio does bring up some important issues relevant for understanding the region today. He outlines, for example, a very broad spectrum of issues emerging within the Kyiv-Moscow-Donbas triangle. Many of these issues have their roots in culture, identity, history, economics and geopolitics. He specifically notes the gaps in Donbas identity to illustrate the ease of which Russia arrived in the region which led to war. Local residents became convinced that the armed resistance was a rightful deed as they were defending their community against separatist Ukrainian forces who attempted to break away from their natural home in the Russian World. From this perspective it was Donbas which was the only “loyal” Ukrainian region, while the government in Kyiv transformed into a rebellious junta. The criminal authorities in the separatists regions promulgated these narratives which led to an acceptance of Russian support against “Ukrainian separatists”. The perception of the war in Donbas as a defensive deed was also shared by the
majority Russians. Kuzio notes that the Russian volunteers never regarded their engagement in the war as a fight in a foreign land for alien values.

**Through Putin’s eyes**

*Putin’s War against Ukraine* pays significant attention to the Russian president’s personal contribution to the war in Ukraine. Actually, the title of the book clearly indicates that this will be the case. Step by step, Kuzio unveils the evolution of Putin since he was a KGB agent in Dresden in 1989 to his third re-election as president in 2012 until today. In particular, one may find reflections on how Putin’s thinking developed and what became his ambitions for Ukraine. Kuzio concludes that the 2004 Orange Revolution was a personal 9/11 (in reference to the September 11th 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States) for Putin. Since that time he was dreaming of retaliation and revenge. Kuzio believes that Viktor Yanukovych’s Party of Regions often acted hand-in-hand with Putin and the Kremlin. For instance, it tolerated covert services and pro-Russian NGO’s in Crimea and Donbas which directly led to the subsequent annexation and war. Kuzio argues that the invasion of the “little green man” and the armament of local thugs were a part of a greater masterplan, elaborated much earlier. The full masterplan aiming at the restoration of Russia’s grip in the post-Soviet space is presented in chapter eight. It should be stressed again that it goes in line with Kuzio’s previous publications on the topic. Specifically, one should speak here of his regular insights into Crimean policies and security issues since the 2000s.

Using Putin-centred facts, arguments and judgements to create a narrative mosaic, Kuzio regularly reiterates the selected key messages throughout the book. For instance, he argues that Putin does not perceive Ukraine as a self-sustainable state, and that Putin declared war against the West in 2007 in Munich, but no one took it seriously. In a way, Kuzio challenges the reader to acknowledge that the best way to understand contemporary Russia – and predict its behaviour – lies in the understanding of Putin and his ambitions. At the very least, there is no doubt that this is Kuzio’s framework for understanding, which is evident from the very first pages of the book.

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