Ukraine and Russian Neo-Imperialism

The Divergent Break

Ostap Kushnir
Introduction

Ukraine is a state which is hard to predict. After the Cold War, Western economists assessed the industrial, infrastructural, and human potential of Ukraine and concluded that it would rocket high once it joined the free market and implemented necessary reforms. They were wrong. Throughout the whole 1990s, Ukraine was an underachiever which muddled in the crony corruption and—at the same time—continued dreaming of the “bright future.” The Soviet-era elites and their trustees remained in power notwithstanding inflation, recession, financial crises, and social depression. Therefore, only few predicted in 2003–2004 that Viktor Yushchenko, a nonaligned candidate, would override the ossified political system and become the president. He did though. His victory was proclaimed by numerous commentators as a confident break with the past. One more failure. In 2010, Victor Yanukovych, the oligarch-backed nominee and the major competitor to Yushchenko in the elections of 2004, won the presidency. Immediately, a huge rollback of democratic and liberal reforms took place with majority of citizens accepting such a U-turn. Bearing this in mind, the social explosion of 2013–2014 against the numerous misconducts of power—called Euromaidan—came again as a surprise to many. This explosion was unlikely to happen; it was even more unlikely to become so violent and so “successful;” it was utterly unlikely to trigger scenarios of the Crimean annexation and Donbas insurgency, which followed soon afterwards.

Ukraine is stable in its instability. It happens sometimes that major social or political irritants fail to awaken Ukrainian civic movements while weak irritants provide sufficient impetus to launch a revolution. This said, since 1990s Ukraine has been characterized with often-irrational vagabond of power between competitive structures, hierarchies, and actors. To explain this phenomenon, one should look at the historical experience of the state
and, in particular, reassess contradictions steaming from its postcolonial and postcommunist legacy, as well as from the fuzzy feeling of sovereignty. To paraphrase, contemporary Ukraine continues its development on the tracks of Soviet political tradition, as well as struggles—with more and more assertion every year—to rediscover its ingenuity and objective geopolitical belonging. This leads to stochastic, but comparatively regular evocations of various instabilities.

Transitional processes taking place in Ukraine are different from those in its neighborhood, for instance in the Russian Federation. With both states deeply connected to the Soviet political tradition, they interpret and develop it equivocally. The system of governance, national myths, civil society, religious tolerance, human rights—these are only few issues one may name *ad hoc* to manifest differences. The latter, though, seem to be very minor in comparison with the identity-forming impact of the centuries long, historical coexistence and cogovernance within one border. The Moscow-led historical coexistence and cogovernance, to be completely honest.

As for today, Moscow does not forsake attempts to preserve its geopolitical grasp. Russian brand stands behind virtually every of the conflicts in the postcommunist space: Nagorno-Karabakh, Tajikistan, Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Adjara (unsuccessful), South Kyrgyzstan, Crimea, Donbas. The list may also be expanded to the First and Second Chechen Wars, which are usually regarded as Russian interior conflicts. Depending on the situation, Russian armed forces are portrayed as arriving as peacemakers or peacekeepers with the Kremlin often denies it is one of the sides in the conflict. Considering the “soft” and “hard” power of Russia, it is no surprise that it takes decisive actions in its neighborhood. It would be improvident otherwise. However, some of these measures look like parts of a farsighted expansionist strategy, not the precise surgical strikes aimed at a prompt pacification and securing long-term peace between all sides. The recent Russian role in the Ukrainian crisis provides a good example for this.

It is hard to underestimate the potential bilateral benefits of cooperation between Ukraine and Russia, as well as to disregard the historical traditions of such cooperation. Ukraine provides its territory and infrastructure for Russian export of resources to the European Union, Ukraine is one of the biggest markets for Russian goods, Ukrainian skilled, and unskilled workers are often employed in Russia, the list may be continued. However, it seems that the latter is not feeling very comfortable with Ukraine’s ability to conduct sovereign policies. Russia would like its neighbor firmly gripped in its orbit; this will allow the Kremlin to enjoy more power in the postcommunist space, as well as on the global scale. Ukraine is a brick, but a crucial one, in Russia’s foreign policy and geopolitical competition with the West. As Haukkala concludes: “The ferocity of the Russian reaction following the undoing of the
Yanukovych regime in Ukraine is made understandable by the key role the country plays in the Russian plans to build a credible counter-pole to the EU in Eurasia: Without Ukraine, this dream would essentially unravel. 5

With this said, Russian leaders are occasionally questioning Ukraine’s right to be a sovereign state. The historical, political, economic, cultural, and other ties between states provide the explicit rationale for them to intervene in Ukraine’s affairs, lobby Russian interests there, and—if the outcome is not satisfactory—implement even more harsh actions. Russian leaders often perceive Ukrainians and Russians as one nation and continue to reiterate this mantra, even though the truth may not be as black and white. 6

The focus of this book is twofold. On the one hand, it aims to prove that the rationale behind Russia’s aggressive actions in its neighborhood resides in its goal of achieving certain geostrategic objectives which are largely predefined by the state’s imperial traditions, memories, and fears that the Kremlin may irretrievably lose control over lands which were once Russian. In other words, Russia constantly remains an expansion-oriented and centralized state regardless of epochs and political regimes ruling over it. That is its geopolitical modus operandi successfully tested throughout history. On the other hand, the book scrutinizes Ukraine as a young postcolonial and postcommunist state which, unlike Russia, is more prone to democratize and decentralize. To understand the logics of the ongoing Ukrainian transformation, its domestic and international developments are assessed in their connection to the Soviet political tradition and the medieval legacy of the Cossack statehood.

Apart from this, the book aims to outline differences between political cultures of Ukrainian and Russian nations. This envisages scrutiny of historical experiences and their impacts on the Ukrainian and Russian state-building, institutional structures, national identity, religious issues, and other features of sovereignty. Based on these discoveries, a structure of symbolic thinking which predefines indigenous understandings of justice and order has been constructed for Ukrainians and Russians.

This book consists of five chapters. The first chapter presents major aspects of the Russian national identity and political culture. It also uncovers and explains the emergence of the unique system of governance, which favors patronialism, community-thinking, and unofficial practices. Apart from this, an insight is provided into what the Western academia defines as the protean nature of Russian identity or the mysterious Russian soul. The second chapter unveils the rationale behind the expansionist and imperialist tradition of Russian governance. To accomplish this task, major works of the key Russian philosophers and geostrategists have been analyzed. This analysis embraces interpretations of classical and contemporary doctrines which shape the state’s policies, in particular Pan-Slavism, Eurasianism, federalism, isolationism, messianism, and others. Apart from this, a criticism of the
Russian expansionism by Ukrainian and Western intellectuals has also been covered. The third chapter focuses on the contemporary Russian policies in its neighborhood and—specifically—policies toward Ukraine. An attempt is made to outline the rationale behind the aggressive stance of President Putin. At the very end of the chapter, a structure of the Russian political thinking—with emphasis on its symbolic constructs—has been presented. The fourth chapter focuses solely on Ukraine. Its aim resides in describing a historical experience of the Ukrainian state-building attempts. In particular, the chapter outlines major contributions of the Russian and Soviet rules to Ukrainian state- and nationhood, as well as explains major restrictions and distortions which prevented indigenous historical development. A peculiar attention is paid to the Cossack medieval traditions of sovereignty, which make Ukraine a very specific geopolitical formation. The fifth chapter addresses the repercussions of the Cossack traditions in the contemporary Ukrainian policies, which manifests itself through sharp deviations from the logics of the Soviet-type behaviorism. An attempt is made to explain the nature of Ukrainian revolutionary movements and volunteering, as well as to justify the overall proneness of the state to democratize and decentralize. Ukraine diverging from its stereotypical image—as drawn by the Russia-dominated academic and political environments—has been presented in this chapter. At the very end, a simplified structure of the Ukrainian symbolic thinking has also been provided.

**METHODODOLOGICAL REMARKS**

This book is grounded on two major methodological pillars: the Eric Voegelin’s theory of political symbolism and the Maurice Halbwachs’s theory of the collective memory.

Writing of Voegelin (1901–1985), Trepanier defined him as a daring scholar who “rejected the positivist psychoanalytical approaches to the study of politics. He conceived of politics as the human search for order and justice as experienced by humans’ relationships to nature, society, and transcendence. These experiences become symbolized in political symbols, which society either accepted or rejected, and can be analyzed as ones of order and justice.” According to Voegelin himself, when studying human societies, one should not look at them as completed facts or events, but as little worlds—or cosmions—in their unceasing development. They are internally illuminated and streamlined by the accumulated experiences of the struggle of human beings for a self-realization and organization of their livelihoods in a given environment. Every society has thus a symbolic vision of itself which emerges and evolves in a process of historical maturation of this society.