

RUSSIA, UKRAINE, AND LASTING PEACE IN EUROPE

Among the many competing narratives that drive the war in Ukraine, the healing of the Ukrainian people themselves is often overlooked. That is because current Western policy overlooks the Other Ukraine, whose disagreement with the policies of the Ukrainian government since 2014 led up to this conflict. The Western response to Russia's invasion has been tailored to punishing Russia, but not necessarily to healing the domestic tension within Ukraine. This article suggests that only a reconciliation within Ukraine can bring lasting social harmony to Ukraine and peace to Europe as a whole.

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*Keywords: Conflict Resolution, Domestic Tensions,
Eastern Europe, European Politics, Reconciliation,
Russian Invasion of Ukraine, Ukrainian Politics.*



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Competing Narratives are Driving the Current Conflict in Ukraine

The official Ukrainian narrative about the war goes more or less like this: In an effort to end Ukraine's existence as a state, Russia launched an unprovoked attack on Ukraine. Testing the waters, before that, Russia annexed Crimea and invaded Eastern Ukraine. Thus, the sole reason for today's conflict is Moscow's military intervention, which is part of a larger effort by Russian President Vladimir Putin to reconstitute the USSR.

The official Russian narrative, by contrast, focuses on the events that led up to Russia's military invasion. It goes more or less like this: By disbanding the Warsaw Pact, post-communist Russia thought it had laid the foundation for a mutual security arrangement with NATO based on the principle that the latter would not expand eastward.¹ Instead, however, the West reneged on this commitment, and began to build up its military infrastructure in its newly acquired territories. Russia also repeatedly inquired about Russian NATO membership (no less than four times), but was consistently rebuffed.² Subsequent efforts by some Western governments to have Ukraine join NATO, only exacerbated Russia's sense of insecurity.

There is, however, a third narrative about the current war. It focuses not on the external violence, but on the internal violence that culminated in the seizure of the Ukrainian Parliament by anti-government militants. Fearing a repeat of the 2004 Maidan, which they believed had been used to steal the 2004 elections, two regions, Crimea and Donbass, demanded that the political agreement signed on 21 February 2014 be honored. When this did not occur, rebels in these two regions appealed to Russia for protection. Russia responded by annexing Crimea, but urged Donbass to return to Ukraine, and proposed the Minsk Accords as a roadmap for its re-integration.³

Over the next eight years, Russia sought a political compromise that would end the rebellion. The Minsk II Accords proposed a simple formula: greater cultural and political autonomy for Donbass, in exchange for rejoining Ukraine. These efforts, however, were routinely thwarted by the Ukrainian government, with, it now seems,

¹ "NATO Expansion: What Gorbachev Heard," *National Security Archive*, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early>

² Carlos Manuel Sanchez, "El día que Rusia quiso entrar en la OTAN," *ABC.es*, 13 March 2022. <https://www.abc.es/xlsemanal/historia/rusia-otan-union-sovietica-putin-historia.html>; Hélène Richard, "No room for Moscow in 'common European home,'" *Le Monde diplomatique*, October 2018.

³ The history of this rebellion is discussed in detail chapter five of my book, *The Tragedy of Ukraine: What Classical Greek Tragedy Can Teach Us About Conflict Resolution*. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2023.

On the one hand, the West’s massive financial and military assistance has undoubtedly helped to shore up Ukraine’s resolve to fight against Russian aggression, at least in the short term. In the long term, however, shutting down a diplomatic solution, which Ukraine was apparently willing to consider in March 2022, may, over time, lead to losses so great that they undermine the country’s viability.⁹

The vast disparity between the population, wealth, and resources of Ukraine and Russia has led some analysts to suggest that Ukraine’s costly battlefield victories will only last until Russia decides to mobilize its resources fully.¹⁰ Should that occur, and assuming that NATO support for Ukraine remains limited to sanctions, weapons, and financing, then Russia’s military victory could be simply a matter of time.¹¹

Instead of embracing an ineffective strategy that prolongs the conflict indefinitely, Western governments should consider a peace strategy that focuses on the interests of the Ukrainian people—all the Ukrainian people. This would require policies that focus first and foremost on domestic reconciliation and the restoration of social harmony among Ukrainians.

While it may be politically incorrect to say so now, there is another Ukraine that has been struggling to achieve cultural, political, and religious recognition within Ukraine since the country’s independence in 1991. President Zelensky himself recently alluded to it at the 2023 Munich Security Conference, saying: “To be honest, many have fled our state. Many remained with the invaders of their own accord. And there is plenty of information of this kind.”¹²

I refer to this segment of the population as the Other Ukraine, and suggest that if this conflict is ever to be resolved, it will be through a better understanding, both within Ukraine and without, of what it has been trying to achieve since Ukrainian independence, and why this has led to war in Eastern Europe.

What is The Other Ukraine, and What Does it Want?

The diverse settlement patterns East and West of the Dnieper river, which bisects

⁹ Ishaan Tharoor, “The argument for settling for talks and ‘avoiding long war’ in Ukraine,” *The Washington Post*, 1 February 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/02/01/ukraine-avoid-long-war-rand-talks-argument/>

¹⁰ Michael Gfoeller and David H. Rundell, “Lessons From the U.S. Civil War Show Why Ukraine Can’t Win,” *Newsweek*, 6 December 2022. <https://www.newsweek.com/lessons-us-civil-war-show-why-ukraine-cant-win-opinion-1764992>; Christopher Caldwell, “Russia and Ukraine Have Incentives to Negotiate. The U.S. Has Other Plans,” *New York Times*, 7 February 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/07/opinion/russia-ukraine-us-tanks.html>

¹¹ Ted Galen Carpenter, “Unwarranted Optimism,” *The American Conservative*, 13 February 2023. <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/unwarranted-optimism/>

¹² “Zelensky na Miunkhenskoj konferentsii: ‘Glubinnoi korruptsii v Ukraine net’,” *Zerkalo nedeli*, 17 February 2023. <https://zn.ua/POLITICS/zelenskij-na-mjunkhenskoj-konferentsii-hlubinnoj-korruptsii-v-ukraine-net.html>

Ukraine, established the historical-cultural pattern of eastern Ukraine as bicultural. A self-sustaining regional identity developed there, in which both the Russian and Ukrainian languages interacted freely. It is interesting to note that, whereas in the Ukrainian constitution, the Ukrainian language is the only official language, in the first constitution of the rebel-held portions of Donetsk, and to this day in Lugansk and Crimea, both Russian and Ukrainian are given official status.

“It is the view of many senior Ukrainian government officials that after the war, the Other Ukraine will need to be subjected to a generation or more of military occupation, much like the South was after the American Civil War.”

Regional voting patterns have also been very different from the rest of Ukraine. While critics often attribute this to nostalgia for the Soviet Union, it is better understood as a yearning for Soviet-era cosmopolitanism, which embraced the region’s mixed cultural heritage and industrial accomplishments. This manifested itself politically in a visceral rejection of the monoethnic nationalism popular in western Ukraine, and in the affirmation of a Ukrainian identity that is inextricably tied to Russian culture, if not to Russian politics. This pattern manifested itself strongly in both the 2004 and 2014 Maidans. Whereas in Western Ukraine, support for the Maidan rarely fell below 80 percent, in Eastern and Southern Ukraine, it rarely topped 20 percent. Prior to 2022, this Other Ukraine comprised about 40 percent of the total population.¹³ They tend to be Orthodox Christians, rather than Greek Catholics; they speak both languages fluently, but tend to regard Russian their native tongue, and they see their Ukrainian heritage as an integral part of Russian culture, rather than something separate from it. When given a choice, they typically opt for a closer alliance with Russia than with the West.

In his 1991 electoral “Appeal to Russian Compatriots,” Ukraine’s first president Leonid Kravchuk promised the Other Ukraine “full-fledged co-ownership” of the country. He vowed that “any attempt to discriminate against them on ethnic grounds

¹³ In July 2021, the Ukrainian polling agency Rating asked Ukrainians whether they agreed with President Putin’s statement that “Russians and Ukrainians are one people, who belong to one historical and spiritual space.” Nationwide 41 percent said they did. “Suspilno-politychni nastroi naseleynnya (23–25 lypnia 2021) – Ukraina – Doslidzhennya – Sotsiolozhichna hrupa Reitynh,” http://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/obschestvenopoliticheskie_nastroeniya_naseleniya_23-25_ilyulya_2021.html

would be resolutely suppressed.”¹⁴ Vyacheslav Chornovil, the leader of *Rukh*, an independence movement popular in Western Ukraine, also endorsed this approach, and advocated for a federal Ukraine with a bi-cameral legislature that would give all regions a voice.¹⁵ This spirit of accommodation peaked in 2012, when the Ukrainian parliament voted to allow any region with a 10 percent minority population the right to use that language for official purposes. Within weeks all the regions in the Eastern half of the country adopted Russian as their second language.

This was the very first law rescinded by the rump Ukrainian parliament that ousted President Yanukovich in February 2014. Crimea, the only region of Ukraine in which the majority identified itself as ethnically Russian, then opted, with Russian military support, to leave Ukraine. The goal of the rebellion in Donbass, however, was not to leave Ukraine, but to have its autonomy enshrined in the Ukrainian Constitution. This was also the solution advocated by Russia at the time, which refused to recognize the Donbass independence referenda, and instead proposed the Minsk Accords, which would have forced Donbass to rejoin Ukraine, in exchange for limited regional autonomy.

As we know, this effort failed, and in February 2022 Russia decided that the only way to ensure both the rights and safety of the local population would be to incorporate them into Russia. However, wherever the demarcation line ultimately winds up being drawn, it will once again split families and relatives, just as the border between Ukraine and Russia did in 1991.

Wars Changes Public Attitudes (For a While)

Western and Central Ukraine have long espoused the idea of an independent Ukraine. For just as long, however, Southern and Eastern Ukraine have been fiercely loyal to the idea that Ukraine and Russia share a common destiny. In these regions, while positive attitudes toward Putin and the Russian government fell sharply after 2014, personal sympathy for average Russians did not. As late as July 2021, a national survey of Ukrainians revealed that 41 percent (and nearly two-thirds in the East and South) agreed with Vladimir Putin that Russians and Ukrainians are one people.¹⁶ As pro-Maidan journalist Vitaly Portnikov remarked disconsolately in early 2022: “As long as Ukrainians and Russians cry over the same television shows, the president of Ukraine is definitely Vladimir Putin, not Vladimir Zelensky.”¹⁷

¹⁴ “Obrashchenie L.M. Kravchuka ‘K Russkim sootchestvennikam,’” [1991]. <https://perma.cc/CG8D-SBZ3>

¹⁵ Nicolai N. Petro, *The Tragedy of Ukraine* (Boston and Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), p. 78.

¹⁶ “Suspilno-politychni nastroi naseleennya (23–25 lypnia 2021) – Ukraina – Doslidzhennya – Sotsiolohichna hrupa Reitynh.”

¹⁷ “V Kieve zavavili, chto bolshinstvo Ukrainitsev schitaet Putina prezidentom,” [In Kiev, they say that the Majority of Ukrainians Consider Putin Their President] *Regnum*, 1 January 2022. <https://regnum-ru.turbopages.org/regnum.ru/s/news/3467722.html>

But wars can change people's attitudes dramatically, and it is indisputable that Ukrainian hostility toward Russia is currently at an all-time high. At the same time, however, it would be foolish to assume that this will always be so.¹⁸ As President John F. Kennedy remarked in 1963, just a few weeks after the Cuban missile crisis, "history teaches us that enmities between nations, as between individuals, do not last forever. However fixed our likes and dislikes may seem, the tide of time and events will often bring surprising changes in the relations between nations and neighbors."¹⁹ We need only think of how dramatically attitudes have shifted between England and Ireland, Mexico and the United States, or France and Germany.

I suspect that any long term shift in the mentality of the Other Ukrainians away from Russia, if it occurs, will result not from the war *per se*, but from the political and cultural restrictions that Kiev is likely to impose on the Other Ukraine afterwards. It is the view of many senior Ukrainian government officials that after the war, the Other Ukraine will need to be subjected to a generation or more of military occupation, much like the South was after the American Civil War.²⁰

One problem with such a policy is that it may not work. Thirty years of independence have failed to make Ukrainian nationalism more appealing in Eastern and Southern. Surveys taken at the end of 2021 showed that Russian language books, television, and music, were consistently more popular than Ukrainian.²¹ While censorship and political pressure will reduce this popularity for the current generation, the appeal of Russia's cognate culture for future generations of Ukrainians should not be underestimated.

A second problem is that the monoethnic nationalism that is currently being

¹⁸ The reliability of wartime polling in Ukraine is discussed in detail by Gerald Toal, who concludes: "considerable skepticism is required about the representativeness of wartime polling, especially when it comes to possible sea changes in geopolitical attitudes." Gerard Toal, "Public opinion polls in wartime Ukraine: do they tell the full story?" *Canadian Dimension*, 31 January 2023. <https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/public-opinion-polls-in-wartime-ukraine-do-they-tell-the-full-story>.

¹⁹ John F. Kennedy, "Commencement Address at American University, Washington, DC, June 10, 1963," *JFK Library*, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/american-university-19630610>

²⁰ Pavlo Vuets and Stanislav Gruzdev, "Oleksiy Reznikov: Bezpecha reintehratsiya Donbasu zaime minimum 25 rokov," [Oleksiy Reznikov: A Safe Reintegration of Donbass Will Take at Least 25 Years] *Glavcom.ua*, 11 July 2020. <https://glavcom.ua/interviews/oleksiy-reznikov-bezpechna-reintegraciya-donbasu-zayme-minimum-25-rokiv-692369.html>;

"Gennady Moskal: Prorossiiskie nastroyeniya v Luganskoj oblasti 80–95 percent," [Gennady Moskal: Pro-Russian Moods in the Luhansk Region are 80–95 percent] *Ukrainska pravda*, 30 October 2014. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/articles/2014/10/30/7042701/>; "Vsemu Donbassu gotovyat pravilo 'Moskalya,'" ["Moskal" Rule Is Being Prepared for the Whole Donbass] *Vesti.ua*, 2 June 2015. <https://vesti.ua/donbas/101944-vsenu-donbassu-gotovjat-pravilo-moskalja>

²¹ Viktoriya Venk, "Zrada pod elochku," [Treason under the Christmas Tree] *Strana.ua*, 2 January 2021. <https://strana.one/news/309931-chto-ukraintsy-iskali-v-google-i-smotreli-v-youtubena-novyj-hod.html>; Olena Barsukova, "'Ukraina' zamist 'Ukrayna,'" [Ukraina instead of UkrAina] *Ukrainska pravda*, 4 January 2022. <https://life.pravda.com.ua/society/2022/01/4/247047/>

proposed by the Kiev regime as the solution to Ukraine's cultural and political divisions is incompatible with the principles of the EU. It is hard to see how the EU can reconcile two conceptually incompatible tracks: on the one hand trying to suppress nationalism among its more "enlightened" Western members, while on the other hand endorsing nationalism in Ukraine. The attempt to do so has already led to severe friction between Brussels, on the one hand, and Warsaw, Budapest on the other.

A Path Forward

A better way to resolve this conundrum would be for European institutions to overcome their present indifference for the aspirations of minority communities that, like the Other Ukraine, retain a profound sense of kinship with Russia, and begin to think of Russians and Russian culture as essential components of European identity. This is more or less what Jacques Attali, former counselor to French President François Mitterrand, and founding head of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, recently called for. He argued that the war in Ukraine cannot be won without forging pan-European institutions that would help to cement the peace afterwards. For Attali, this means bringing Russia into a European democratic space through "un plan massif de reconstruction de la région, de la Biélorussie à l'Albanie, de Kiev à Vladivostok. Un plan intégrant les uns avec les autres, et qui ne serait activé dans un pays que lorsque celui serait de retour sur le chemin de la démocratie."²²

While Attali admits that such a vision seem inconceivable today, he reminds us that it was just such a vision, conceived before the end of the Second World War, that eventually led to the creation of the European Union.

Unfortunately, such a vision has proved to be beyond the imagination of the first generation of post-Cold War leaders. It must therefore become an essential priority for the next generation, for without such a vision, expressed in concrete policies, Europe as a whole will be condemned to perpetual conflict with Russia.

²² Jacques Attali, "La guerre en Ukraine, et après?" 29 January 2023, *Les Echos*. <https://www.lesechos.fr/idees-debats/editos-analyses/la-guerre-en-ukraine-et-apres-1901202>