

THE CURRENT CRISIS IN UKRAINE

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'In the words of the popular proverb, Moscow was the heart of Russia; St Petersburg its head; but Kiev its mother'.¹

The current crisis in the Ukraine was not unforeseen. It is undoubtedly a result of the breakup of the USSR but its genesis, like so many other problems in Europe, lies further back in history and has been coloured not only by the fracture of the Soviet Union but also by the events of Stalinist rule and Nazi invasion. Indeed the use of Second World War anti-fascist rhetoric by Russophones against their Ukrainian countrymen smacks of an unreconstructed communist approach which is not helped by Crimean pro-Russian protestors filmed against the background of Lenin's statue. One can well imagine the baggage that comes from the Stalin-induced famine in the Ukraine with a death toll equal to that claimed in the Nazi holocaust. The current conflict, however, has been painted by the Western media in general, in almost Cold-War terms – as a battle solely between the Russian monolith and a defenceless, innocent neighbour. It is generally accepted, however, that in assessing a situation one ought to consider both sides of the argument.

The Russian perspective

Using that perspective allows one to determine whether Russia is acting unreasonably in the circumstances in which it now finds itself. Over 20 years ago in the book, *Engaging Russia*, a report to the Trilateral Commission, by Messrs Blackwill, Braithwaite and Tanaka, Blackwill advised that, despite the fall of the USSR, the national security institutions of Russia still held to Soviet-style and authoritarian rhetoric and behaviour. Blackwill observed:

From this perspective, other governments do not have honest differences with Moscow or reasonable strategic concerns; they mount calculated provocations against Russia. Other governments seek to strengthen Russia's neighbours only in order to weaken Russia. Other governments are not benevolent bystanders or hapless in their policies; they conspire to cause Russia's downfall.²

He observed too that, then, the Russian national security elite considered that the fall of the Soviet Union, and thus Russia, was a terrible catastrophe – an opinion voiced too by President Putin when he described it as *'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century'*. That fall resulted in 25 million ethnic Russians being "left" in former constituent parts of the Soviet Union which had now become independent States and, as far back as 1995, Kozyrev, the Russian Foreign Minister warned that, *'there*

¹ James H Billington, *The Icon and the Axe – An Interpretive History of Russian Culture*. P.3. Published by Vintage Books, NY, 1970.

² *Engaging Russia – A Report to the Trilateral Commission* : 16, p.5. Published by the Trilateral Commission, NY, 1995.

may be cases when the use of direct military force may be needed to protect our compatriots abroad.’³ Before the recent Ukrainian crisis such policy was pursued in the Georgian-Ossetian-Abkhazian conflicts.

From a Russian perspective, according to Blackwill, Western interest in Ukraine is regarded with suspicion and he observes:

*Few Russians really believe that that Ukraine should be an independent nation. This is not surprising. Russian history and national psychology have been deeply entangled with the area now comprising the territory of Ukraine for a millennium. The origins of the Russian state are found in the Kievan Rus in the ninth century and Russians have thought of the inhabitants of this area as their kith and kin at least since 1654 when the Ukrainian Cossacks sought the protection of the Tsar against the Poles and Turks. Although most ethnic Ukrainians have another view, this does not diminish the Russian conviction that a Ukraine separated from Russia is abnormal and that eventually this unnatural situation will surely be remedied.*⁴

Blackwill admitted that, at the time of writing [1995], Russian policies had not developed in such a way as to undermine the territorial integrity of Ukraine and observed that, since 1991, *Russia has acted with considerable restraint regarding Ukraine. Moscow has worked with Kiev and the ethnic Russians in the Crimea to avoid disintegrative crisis there.*⁵ That, however, was the situation before Ukraine’s nuclear arsenal was removed and before Western interference in Ukraine’s internal affairs.

There is therefore little doubt that Russia probably regrets losing Ukraine and would favour its re-integration in Russia. What the ethnic Ukrainians might feel is a different matter.

A Geopolitical Pivot

Russian mistrust concerning Western intentions should surely, therefore, have been a consideration in the West’s dealings with Russia – particularly concerning the expansion of the EU and especially NATO in the former Soviet sphere of influence. President Bush senior recognised these concerns and gave assurances that NATO would not extend into those areas. However these assurances were not honoured by his successors and NATO expansion proceeded apace almost up to the borders of Russia. Such action rather than assuaging suspicion only served to exacerbate it. But Blackwill admits too that *‘Other than the question of NATO enlargement, no other issue poses as critical a danger to relations between the West and Russia as the future of Ukraine.’*⁶

Zbigniew Brzezinski in his work, *The Grand Chessboard – American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, describes Ukraine as a

‘geopolitical pivot because its very existence as an independent country helps to transform Russia. Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire. Russia without Ukraine can still strive for imperial status, but it would then become a predominantly Asian imperial state.... However, if Moscow regains control over Ukraine, with its 52 million people and major resources as well as its access to

³ Ibid., p.7-8.

⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, p.52

*the Black Sea, Russia automatically again regains the wherewithal to become a powerful imperial state, spanning Europe and Asia. Ukraine's loss of independence would have immediate consequences for central Europe, transforming Europe into the geo-political pivot on the eastern frontier of a united Europe.'*⁷

He too confirms that many Russians consider Ukraine's independence to be an aberration, as does Rodric Braithwaite who admits that, 'Even the most open-minded [Russians] feel its loss like an amputated limb.'⁸

Sustaining Russian imperial aspirations

One can therefore clearly see where Russian thoughts could lead were the Russians so inclined – the annexation of the whole of Ukraine and not simply the Crimean peninsula because, as Brian Downing admits, 'Today, the Ukraine is vital to Russian national security and foreign policy.'⁹

Apart from the wishes of the Ukrainian ethnic population (which is no little concern) the annexation of Ukraine to Russia would be of direct concern to Poland [and Baltic States with a large Russian population] which would revert much to the position it held as a geopolitical pivot in 1939 – only this time it is a member of NATO rather than the subject of a worthless treaty with Gt Britain. Annexation would of course also serve as sustaining Russian imperial aspirations in opposition to those of the USA which might explain US and EU involvement in the internal affairs of the Ukraine which some have blamed as the catalyst for the *de facto* Russian annexation of the Crimea.

The fruits of corruption

The current crisis in the Ukraine might not have arisen – at least as it has – had the Ukraine developed into a stable, incorrupt and relatively well-functioning state, however governed - whether in a democracy or in a benign authoritarian state. The opposite has been the case. According to more than one observer the country is bankrupt and has been controlled almost since its inception as an independent state by politicians whose hallmark is incompetence or corruption and who, if not oligarchs themselves, are stooges of oligarchs. Indeed one could claim that the oligarchs control the country. There is evidence to suggest that those who seek to replace Yanukovich are no less corrupt than he was alleged to be. Rodric Braithwaite, former UK ambassador to Russia and joint author of the Trilateral publication mentioned above, confirms both the state of the Ukrainian body-politic and the inadvisability of the West's stirring of a hornets' nest:

Things started well enough. Russia and Ukraine negotiated a sensible agreement to allow the Russian Black Sea Fleet to remain in Crimea. With well-judged concessions, the Ukrainians assuaged the demands of Crimea's Russian inhabitants for closer ties with the motherland. But the Ukrainians were unlucky in their country's new leaders, most of whom were incompetent or worse. They failed to modernise the economy; corruption ran out of control. Then Putin arrived in 2000, ambitious to strengthen Russia's influence with its neighbours. And the West began its ill-judged attempts to draw

⁷ *The Grand Chessboard – American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, p.46. Published by Basic Books, NY, 1997.

⁸ <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/ukraine-crisis-no-wonder-vladimir-putin-says-crimea-is-russian-9162734.html>

⁹ Geopolitics in the Ukraine Crisis, 23-02-2014.

*Ukraine into its orbit regardless of Russian sensitivities*¹⁰

Only recently the Foreign Minister of Estonia, Urman Paet, in a report of his visit to Ukraine, in a leaked telephone conference with EU Foreign Minister Baroness Ashton, confirmed that there is little faith among ordinary Ukrainians in the coalition which replaced Yanukovich reporting that those on the streets think that ‘*all these guys [now in power] have a dirty past*’, and that ‘*the trust level is absolutely low.*’

The overthrow of President Yanukovich by the demonstrators of the Maiden was by any objective assessment a *coup d'état*. He was overthrown by mob rule orchestrated by his political opponents who are, in the popular opinion, no less corrupt than he. That is not to say that some or even the majority of demonstrators may genuinely seek reforms to eradicate corruption whatever its source.

Nevertheless the fall of Yanukovich and the political anarchy which existed both during and after his *de facto* deposition must have been of genuine concern to the Russians – no less than it was to Ukraine's other neighbours, not only in terms of the bankruptcy of Ukraine – which owed Russia a considerable amount of money, but also in view of the large Russian ethnic population within Ukraine's boundaries and its military interests in the Crimea – home of its Black Sea Fleet. Such concerns were not assuaged by one of the reasons presented for Yanukovich's fall – that of his acceptance of Russian aid rather than EU assistance, nor were they assuaged by the coalition's early announcement to demote the Russian language from its official status in Ukraine.

Other imperial interests

Were such a situation to have arisen solely on account of internal Ukrainian politics the Russians might well have left well alone – as it has been acknowledged they did immediately after Ukraine's independence. As it was, however, there is clear and substantial evidence that other imperial powers were interfering in Ukraine's internal affairs with a view to drawing Ukraine into their sphere of influence and out of Russia's. These were the USA and the EU. Now one might argue that they have as much right to do so as does Russia – which is a moot point – but, if that is the case, their involvement should be subjected to the same scrutiny as Russia's and they should not be able to hold the moral high ground as disinterested, independent brokers – as they pretend to do.

Weighing up the offers

The Western media has given as one of the principal reasons for the Maidan demonstrations, President Yanukovich's decision to prefer a Russian offer of help rather than that of the EU. This was admitted by the Washington Post which stated that:

‘Ukraine has been bitterly divided since last year when Yanukovich allied his government with Russia instead of the European Union in a trade and political partnership. The Kremlin sweetened the deal with \$15 billion in loans and discounts in natural gas.’¹¹

Yet, according to disinterested observers Yanukovich's decision could have been no other in the

¹⁰ <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/ukraine-crisis-no-wonder-vladimir-putin-says-crimea-is-russian-9162734.html>

¹¹ http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/susan-rice-says-russia-should-not-involve-troops-in-ukraine/2014/02/23/374dc380-9cab-11e3-9080-5d1d87a6d793_story.html

circumstances. The EU's offer was predicated upon an IMF loan which would have involved severe economic reforms which would have impacted heavily on Ukrainian industry, agriculture and consumers. The offer was little more than an association agreement but to certain Ukrainians it held the prospect of what they saw as a desirable political and economic alliance with the West. This of course was the aim too of the other imperial powers who sought to draw Ukraine into their embrace. Indeed the Washington Post admits *'that recent developments in Ukraine, including a peace agreement signed Friday, reflects the interests of the United States and Europe.'*¹²

But as Pat Buchanan explains:

*'High among the reasons Yanukovich chose Russia's offer to join its customs union over the EU is that Putin put a better deal on the table. Moscow put up \$15 billion in loans and cut rate gas and oil. The EU offered piddling loans and credits, plus a demand for reforms in the Ukrainian economy monitored by the IMF, but no commitment to full membership of the EU.'*¹³

Ben Aris in the *Moscow Times*, 21-02-2014, asserted that 'the EU was offering \$160 million per annum for the next 5 years while the bond repayments to the International Monetary Fund alone were greater than that amount.'

US and EU interests to the fore

The question that has to be asked and answered, however, is whether the demonstrations in the Maidan were spontaneous or were the result of machinations of *agents provocateurs* both outside and within Ukraine who were determined to remove Yanukovich immediately rather than await the elections of 2015 or earlier elections – He was after all, despite his undoubted failings, the elected Head of State. In Poland and other Communist countries former communists came to power in the immediate aftermath of the fall of communism but their opponents endured this until subsequent elections. If as *The Washington Post* asserts *'the recent events in Ukraine reflect the interests of the United States and Europe'* then one can at the very least suggest that if these events have developed in that way, it was because the US and EU manipulated them in that direction. Victoria Nuland, American Assistant Secretary of State, she who expresses her high opinion of the EU in colourful, undiplomatic language, admitted that the US alone had spent \$5 billion dollars since 1991 to support initiatives aimed at bringing the Ukraine into the EU. In her embarrassing leaked telephone call with US Ambassador Pyatt their discussion about who should be favoured for Ukrainian government positions gave substance to an earlier admission by Susan Rice, US National Security advisor, that *'We [sic] are going to have a unity government. We are going to have near-term elections. We are going to have constitutional reform.'*¹⁴ - An expression not so much of hope but of design.

Nuland expressed her support for the demonstrators by visiting them in the Maidan, as did Senator John McCain, Chairman of the Board of the National Endowment for Democracy's International Republican Institute. The National Institute for Democracy (NED) has been widely associated with involvement in the various 'Colour' revolutions sponsored by the US including the Orange revolution

¹² Ditto

¹³ 'Why Play Cold War Games in Ukraine?' *The American Conservative* 21-02-2014

¹⁴ Ditto

in Ukraine in 2004. Ian Traynor in *The Guardian* stated then that:

*The Democratic Party's National Democratic Institute, the Republican Party's International Republican Institute, the US state department and USAid are the main agencies involved in these grassroots campaigns as well as the Freedom House NGO and billionaire George Soros's open society institute.*¹⁵

Rodric Braithwaite also confirms that the previous Orange revolution was supported by millions of dollars of Western money. It takes no imagination therefore to believe that Yanukovych's fall in Orange II was funded any differently.

All this sadly brings to mind that joke which circulated in the eighties: "Why are there no revolutions in the USA?" "Because there are no US embassies in the USA!"

Hypocrisy

The hypocrisy of western politicians in berating Russia for her provocations, her "invasion" of Crimea and the referendum there is hard to bear. One can scarcely take William Hague, the British Foreign Secretary, seriously when he pontificates about Russia and fails to draw parallels with Libya or Syria (where he would have supported aggression) not to speak of Iraq. Nor, as Peter Hitchens has pointed out, has Hague considered the precedent established by a referendum in Kosovo (supported by the West) against the wishes of Serbia. Hitchens berates *'the arrogant aggression of Western politicians who supported the destabilisation of the Kiev government [which] appeared to be driven by pique over the refusal of Victor Yanukovych to sign a deal with the EU. Pique and moralising are not good bases for foreign policy. Other countries have interests.'*¹⁶

Catholic Concerns

As a Catholic, one naturally has concerns regarding the fate of the Ukrainian Catholics should Russia invade the whole of Ukraine. The Ukraine suffered greatly under Stalin, almost 19% of the population being killed in the Great Terror and this must play a part in modern Ukrainian anxiety. Furthermore the Russian Orthodox Church which is no friend to the Catholic Church in Eastern Europe opposes the recognition of the Catholic Church as a recognised religion in Russia. Nevertheless, while the faith of Catholics may be tested to the extent of persecution in Russia, there is no doubt that it faces an even greater danger in the West where the insidious, silent persecution by secularist States and naked materialism and immorality takes an even greater toll of the faithful. These contrasts are described by Pope Francis by the phrase, *'lux ex oriente, ex occidente luxus'* – light from the East, and from the West – luxury and extravagance'. A phrase not exactly true because the light would undoubtedly have come from the West had the Church not set on a path of auto-destruction in the 1960s and had Our Lady of Fatima's requests been honoured.

The Ukrainian writer Andrew Sorokowski, an old hand from Keston College, suspects that among traditional Catholics there is an element of Russophilia arising from an appreciation of the sacred in the Orthodox liturgy [a sense lost in the Novus Ordo], and also from the apparent moral stance taken by President Putin who, says Sorokowski, has championed a specifically Christian moral code. Putin has also opposed same-sex marriage and the homosexual proselytization of children which all

¹⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/nov/26/ukraine.usa>

¹⁶ *Mail on Line* – 'Am I a Paid Agent of the Kremlin? And other questions 6-03-14

‘progressive’ Western nations have espoused. We have heard more than one Catholic suggest that Putin is doing more to protect traditional Christian values than some Catholic bishops. Sorokowski suggests that the demonstrations on the Maidan were not all in pursuit of materialist ends and that moral values such as justice, dignity and obedience to the just requirements of the law also featured. *‘In fact’ he says ‘these demonstrations have been marked by sobriety, discipline and self restraint ... the demonstrators are not pawns of Putin, agitating for same-sex marriage. They are embracing European values. And European values are first of all Christian values.’*¹⁷ We do not doubt that many of the demonstrators did have these aspirations but mass demonstration such as these are always open to manipulation by others with less benign aims – although we think Sorokowski naïve in expecting Ukrainians to find Christian values in modern European values which are derived more from the French Revolution than the Decalogue.

Sorokowski’s observations were written in late December and perhaps before the more violent episodes which occurred – some undoubtedly participated in by non-Government forces. The observations passed on by the Estonian prime minister Urmas Paet to Baroness Ashton¹⁸ that there was evidence that the snipers responsible for the deaths of the demonstrators were not government forces, as has been claimed, has not been aired in the West.¹⁹ The coalition has refused to investigate these deaths which in itself tells its own story. The notorious FEMEN²⁰ group oppose Yanukovych and thus not all anti-Government forces can be marked with the moral rectitude which belongs to some. That apart, the cynical use of Ukrainian citizens to destabilise Ukraine for the geopolitical aims of certain Western interests is shameful – especially so when the stakes could be so high for Ukraine and its peoples.

Caution

I cannot judge Mr Putin nor can I determine his sincerity regarding his pro-Christian sentiments. I do know, however, that it is not the first time that a Russian Leader has made pro-religious observations for reasons of state and for that reason one ought to be cautious. I would like to believe that Russia and its leader are being drawn towards Christian teaching rather than dialectical materialism and pray that the light of conversion may dawn over all of Russia. Perhaps in such circumstances Russia will become the land of the new Gentiles – a true *lux ex oriente* - in contrast to the West which appears to have rejected the Messiah just as the Jews did. That, however, is a matter for Heaven to determine should Our Lady of Fatima’s requests be met.

Until then we are literally in the hands of God. But whatever occurs be it invasion, war, annexation or *status quo* the blame cannot be placed at Russia’s door alone. Those in the West who foment revolutions elsewhere have no right to become indignant when the rotten fruit of their endeavours is not to their taste. **A S Fraser**

¹⁷ Andrew Sorokowski, ‘The Moscow Mystique meets the Maidan’, published on the Religious Information Service of the Ukraine (RISU) website, 23-12-2013.

¹⁸ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkC4Z67QuC0>

¹⁹ The Estonian Foreign Minister said that, according to people on the ground on the Maidan, *‘People who were killed by snipers, policemen and people from the streets - that they were the same snipers killing people from both sides...it is really disturbing that the new coalition they don’t want to investigate what exactly happened. So that there is now stronger and stronger understanding that behind the snipers it was not Yanukovych but it was somebody from the new coalition.’*

²⁰ See the article elsewhere in this blog, ‘Who said the Satanic is dead?’